Reframing the Turn: Toward an Ethical Poetics of Eco-elegy

The Counterpart (an excerpted novel)

by

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*

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Abstract

As the product of an inquiry realised via two distinct methodologies—practice-led research, and a more traditional scholarly investigation—this thesis comprises two correspondingly distinct parts. These parts, an excerpted elegiac literary novel and the critical essay outlined below, together constitute a creative and critical inquiry into the ethical conundrum of ecological loss and degradation in both life and literature.

In light of the grave implications of climate change and our planetary ecological crisis, elegiac literature is increasingly attending to the reality of ecological loss. Despite the breadth of scholarship within elegy studies and the wider philosophies of mourning and ethics—concerning the question of what, if anything, we owe to the other in literary representations of loss—most of this work has been limited to the singular loss of a human person, through death or estrangement, and most has addressed a broad critical audience rather than creative writers particularly. Despite the vibrant and rapidly expanding disciplines of ecocriticism, ecopoetics, and the broader environmental humanities, research attending to the unique demands of ecological elegy as a literary mode at work across prose as well as poetry, and the complex ethics of writing such elegy, remains relatively sparse.

As a phenomenon encompassing not only loss that is foregone, but loss that is, variably, in-process, contingent and incipient, the divergency of ecological loss confounds traditional elegiac movements of literary mourning for human individuals. In view of the non-foreclosed nature of much ecological loss, this essay contends that the task of elegising such loss ethically demands particular attention to the relation of varying instances of ecological loss to temporality, and a resistance to traditional movements in elegy that objectify and totalise the lost other in the literary movement toward consolation and closure.

In view of such challenges, this essay aims to contribute to a rethinking of how we as writers might approach ecological elegy, and define ecological loss, in consideration of the ethical dangers involved in applying the elegiac mode to the
literary representation of ecological devastation. In doing so, this essay will engage with key thinkers in the fields of elegy studies and the environmental humanities, such as William Watkin and Timothy Morton, while also drawing on psychoanalytic theories of loss and mourning, through the work of Freud and John Bowlby.

Most importantly, in proposing a framework through which to rethink an ethical poetics of ecological elegy, this essay draws on Derrida’s understanding of ethical mourning as both a condition of living friendship, and as a metonymic relation to the dead other—an understanding that comes closer to accounting for the complexity and contingency of much ecological loss, and the difficulty of ethically speaking to such loss in elegy.

Ultimately, it will be argued that the extent to which eco-elegy is ethical is dependent on the extent to which such elegy eschews totalising or foreclosing the divergency, multiplicity and urgent contingency of loss—and others implicated in that loss—in the context of our present ecological predicament. As such, it will be proposed that an ethical poetics of eco-elegy negotiate between foregone, in-process, and incipient forms of loss; loss which also constitutes our own diminishment and deprivation, and for which we are answerable. Such an ethics, it will be suggested, might be imagined in the mythical context of Orpheus finally resisting turning away from lost Eurydice in his mourning.

In proposing this framework, this essay aims to contribute to further discussion within creative writing studies, elegy studies, and related disciplines, of the vital relations between elegy, ecology and ethics.
*hell must break before I am lost*

– Hilda Doolittle, ‘Eurydice’
Introduction

His wife Camille on her deathbed, Monet writes, “I found myself, without being able to help it, in a study of my beloved wife’s face, systematically noting the colours.” What does a writer do, when the world collapses, but write?

– Mark Doty, Heaven’s Coast

Maurice Blanchot observes that every book ‘has a center which attracts it’ (1982: epigraph). If this thesis has such a centre, it is the point at which loss, desire and art converge, a point from which my creative practice, and the critical inquiry leading from this practice, have been drawn.

The result of this creative practice, The Counterpart, is a contemporary literary novel, spanning two continents and three decades—an excerpted version of which will follow this introduction. Exploring the effects of immeasurable loss, and the ends to which art can be brought to bear in the desire to redeem loss, The Counterpart enacts a narrative movement in which the unresolved grief of two generations intersect. As a narrative mobilised and pervaded by divergent instances of loss, felt absence and mourning—those of narrator Ivan and his parents, which are also inflected by the wider losses of history—The Counterpart is located broadly within the sphere of prose elegy, or elegiac literature. Of course, elegy refers to an ancient, distinct and still-evolving literary form and tradition, from Theocritus to Hardy and beyond, which is grounded in poetry, or verse. In a broad sense, the literary elegiac tradition originates in the ancient oral expressions of grief preceding the age of writing, such as the ululations reiterated in Greek tragedy. As David Kennedy, focusing on elegy in English, notes, elegy at once names:

(…) a song of lamentation, in particular a funeral song or lament for the dead; and, in addition, meditative or reflective verse, more properly termed elegiac poetry (2007: 2).
While “elegy” in the formal sense of a discrete literary tradition of verse, or, to follow Kennedy, ‘elegiac poetry’, continues to sustain a rich field of scholarship, at the same time, theorists are attending to applications of elegy as a literary mode at work across a far wider range of literary registers. For example, Jahan Ramazani, in Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney (1994), explores the operations of elegy through non-canonical forms, ‘such as self-elegies, war poems, the blues, epochal elegies, mock-elegies, and Lynch poems’ (1994:xvi). In On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature (2004), William Watkin speaks broadly of the “literature of loss”, examining traditional elegies in dialogue with modern novels such as Ian McEwan’s The Cement Garden (1978), and observing elegiac structures at work across both verse and prose forms. As Kennedy notes, such broader applications of elegy correspond with “John Hollander’s observation that ‘the elegiac tone [is] a mood rather than…a formal mode’” (2007:56). It is in this sense of a narrative “mood” or “tone” that The Counterpart can be considered elegiac, in the way that many novels—The Go-Between (1953) by L.P. Hartley, Bruges-la-Morte (1892) by Georges Rodenbach, Housekeeping (1981) by Marilynne Robinson, The Virgin Suicides (1993) by Jefferie Eugenides, Lolita (1959) by Nabokov, In Search of Lost Time by Proust, most narratives by Anne Michaels, Marguerite Duras, John Banville or W.G. Sebald—might be considered in some way elegiac. (An innovative example of a narrative elegy bridging the forms of poetry and prose is Elizabeth Smart’s 1945 classic, By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept.)

Notably, as referenced by Kennedy, an entry in Virginia Woolf’s diary records her considering substituting the term “elegy” for “novel” in referring to her works (2007:1). And yet, beyond its wider resonance across literature as a mood or tone, elegy enacts a recognisable movement that is not limited to its verse forms. This is a movement in which the speaker looks back upon an instance of loss, in order to retrace the transition from presence to absence, understand the nature of what has been lost, and the way that life and the world have altered as a result. In enacting this movement, the elegiac narrative is at once mobilised and animated by the loss of which it speaks. Further, in the same way that the operations of elegy extend beyond its traditional form in verse, so it is that elegiac loss, the object of which has traditionally been a beloved human individual, deserves a far wider frame of
reference. Again, Ramazani and Watkin are examples of theorists moving in this direction, as evidenced by Ramazani’s consideration of elegies pertaining to the self, to war and to lynching, while Watkin eventually addresses the September 11 terrorist attacks as an elegiac subject confounding in its enormity. However, such considerations remain firmly within the sphere of human loss. In addition to reckoning with the various forms of loss that are precipitated by death, exile, mental illness, erosion of religious faith, familial estrangement and relationship breakdown, The Counterpart approaches the immeasurable implications of ecological loss, through the reverberating impact of an ecological disaster on one of its characters. At the surface, the consequences of this disaster do not present as central to the novel. Yet, in many ways, these consequences constitute the point around which everything in the narrative turns. The implications of such ecological loss, as only intimated in The Counterpart, and the question of how to account for such loss responsibly in writing and thinking about elegiac literature, form the central concerns of the critical component of this thesis.

* 

As a literary mode operating in poetry and prose, elegy is at once mobilised and complicated by the very paradox that animates literary language on the level of the linguistic sign. This is a paradox of generative absence, whereby literary presence is galvanised in the same movement as the real thing it refers to is negated. As George Steiner, referencing the poet Mallarmé, observes:

That which endows the word rose, that arbitrary assemblage of two vowels and two consonants, with its sole legitimacy and life force is, states Mallarmé, “l’absence de toute rose” (1991:96).

Just as the material power of the word in a poem depends on the disappearance of its referent in the world, so is elegy’s existence and force predicated on the absence of its object, the loss of which the movement of elegy recalls and redoubles. This movement is exemplified in the mythical moment of Orpheus’s turn from Eurydice—the moment in which, after defying the gods by turning back to look at Eurydice emerging from the Shades and thus condemning her to a
second death, Orpheus turns his back and relinquishes her once more, before elegiacally singing of her in heavenly music that only Eurydice-in-absence could move him to create. The way in which the form of elegy enacts a movement, predicated on the absence of a referent, that is analogous to that of the linguistic sign, is underwritten by the way that the felt experience of absence, through personal loss, mobilises the authorial instinct itself. That loss, and the strange experience of absence which follows, compels writers to write is a truth on which the elegiac tradition is founded.

Moreover, just as the experience of loss mobilises writers to write, so do writers self-consciously mobilise the narrative and aesthetic powers of loss for their own literary ends. Speaking of this paradoxical productivity of loss in the lives of writers, Hélène Cixous boldly acknowledges how, as writers, ‘in losing we have something to gain. Mixed loss and gain: that’s our crime’ (1993:11). From its instigation in the act of writing to its formal and narrative operations as text, the nature of elegiac literature as a movement contingent on the absence of its object constitutes a complex ethical conundrum, converging around the question of what we, as writers, critics and readers, owe to the other whose absence we elegise. While this question has been considered both directly, within elegy and mourning studies—by thinkers such as William Watkin and Clifton Spargo—and indirectly, within the wider philosophy of mourning—notably by Levinas and Derrida—most of this work has been limited to considering the singular loss of a person, through death or some other means, and most has addressed a broad critical audience rather than creative writers particularly.

As Blanchot and others have discussed, in the negational movement of literary language, the real thing to which the word refers is negated as the materiality of poetic language is foregrounded. Similarly, in the movement of elegiac literature, the object of loss undergoes a kind of double loss on a literary plane, whereby as the original instance of loss is recounted, the poetic figures of language are foregrounded in its place, particularly through the metonymic use of the natural world which surrounds the elegist-mourner, constituting an evocative and consolatory backdrop to grief. Through the eyes of the elegist-mourner, the vitality, materiality and immediacy of the natural environment and its rivers, flowers and mountains, throws into relief the singular thing they have lost, the absence of what once lived. Everything that exists and which appeals to the
mourner’s senses is animated by their loss, and in turn animates the elegy. As seen in the work of thinkers as diverse as John Bowlby and Derrida, the movement of metonymy also characterises the real-world experience of mourning, when the mourner, reckoning with life after loss, must come to terms with a radically altered environment of relations, and her place in it without the other. While Bowlby theorises the experience of loss and recovery as contingent on a reconstitution of relations with objects within the mourner’s environment, Derrida emphasises the importance of mourning as an impossible and unending duty of respect to the other, by at once trying to preserve their alterity, and also maintain them as a living part of the self. These dual operations at work within literary language and mourning—the foregrounding of materiality through negation, and the metonymic relation of a subject to an other via an intermediate object—converge in the relational movement of writing elegy. In this movement, mirroring that of Mallarmé’s rose which is animated on the page while effacing the real rose in the world to which it refers, the elegist-mourner works to signify an object of loss, the real thing which is absent, yet is only able to approach this object through the intermediary figures of language. In this movement of elegy, the object lost in life undergoes a second negation, in literary language which itself, as observed by Blanchot, already constitutes a double negation. This converging movement of negation upon negation, on the levels of language and mourning, which the elegy enacts constitutes at once its strange negative power and its paradox as a form, experienced not only through its reading, but through its writing.

Yet, what happens when it is the elegiac scene itself, the natural environment which for so long has been its source of tropes, which is the object of loss? The escalating global ecological crisis, epitomised by our radically changing climate, is for evident reasons increasingly becoming an object of elegiac literature, and in the process, calling into question not only the formal operations of traditional elegy but also our ethical responsibilities in elegising non-human others, and in thinking ecological loss, which is at once more contingent and more total than our customary modes of mourning and commemoration, and conceptions of loss,
account for. While the fast-growing disciplines of ecocriticism and ecopoetics are working to redress the historical lack of attendance to the natural environment and our relationships to it within cultural, literary and creative writing scholarship\(^1\), critical work specifically located at the intersection between elegy, ecology and ethics remains relatively sparse. A notable exception, Timothy Morton’s 2010 essay, ‘The Dark Ecology of Elegy’, argues that an ecologically responsible literature of loss hesitates from too hastily mourning nature as lost, and instead galvanises the power of ‘politicized melancholy’ in testifying to our present planetary crisis (2010:255). While thought-provoking, Morton’s argument is troubled by inconsistency and a general lack of qualification, particularly regarding the complexity of divergent meanings encompassed by ecological loss, our human culpability in the face of this loss, and his reference to melancholy as a mode of poetic practice. Moreover, Morton’s essay is addressed to literary critics rather than creative writers. Morton’s concept of an elegiac mode that refuses to pre-empt an apocalypse that has not yet occurred, in favour of a mournful dwelling in the difficult moment of incipient loss, offers a useful point of departure for thinking an ethical poetics of eco-elegy. However, this essay argues that any such poetics must be theorised through a more rigorous dialogue with the philosophies of mourning, thanatopoetics and environmental criticism than Morton’s essay conducts. In particular, Derrida’s complex understanding of mourning, as both a metonymic relation to the dead other and as a law of living friendship, offers a compass by which to orient a more nuanced thinking of what an ethical poetics of writing ecological elegy might constitute.

In view of contributing to further discussion, within creative writing studies, of how to reckon responsibly with ecological loss through elegy, this thesis aims to arrive at a tentative framework through which to rethink an ethical poetics of ecological elegy. In doing so, this study interprets “elegy” broadly, as not only a traditional form of poetry but also as a literary mood and movement at work in prose. It is with this broader inflection that this thesis invokes the terms “elegy” and “elegiac mode”. Throughout, the interrelated but discrete terms of “loss” and

\(^1\) Ecocriticism has been defined broadly as ‘the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment’ (Glotfelty,1996:xviii). Ecopoetics can be understood as ‘writing about the nature and practice of poetry’ (Hass, 2012:754).
“absence” will be used in close association in discussion of both elegiac literary operations and mourning. Further, the term “felt absence” is used in reference to the visceral sensation of physical or symbolic absence, felt personally by the writer in the act of writing, while also being in a sense “felt” by the text itself and, by extension, the reader in experiencing the poetics of absence within language on the page. In preference to the psychoanalytical term “lost object”, I have generally used the term “lost other”, which foregrounds the agency of the being(s) lost. Unlike much work in elegy studies, this thesis attends to death as just one among other sources of loss which might call for elegy. Specifically, the term “ecological loss” is invoked in reference not only to the species extinctions and ecological degradation that has already occurred globally, but to that which appears incipient in the near and distant future, particularly in view of recent admissions by climate scientists that we have already gone past the point at which a dangerous two-degree rise in global temperature is avoidable. While all terms are used, I have preferred the term “ecology” over “environment” or “nature” for the way in which the former emphasises the natural world as an interconnected and mutually dependent system of parts, in which humans are also implicated. Finally, for the sake of brevity, the term “ecological elegy” will henceforth be referred to as “eco-elegy”.

Following the excerpted novel, Chapter 1 of the critical essay considers the paradoxical co-movement of materiality and metonymy in elegy as a form and as a writing-act, through the negation of the object to which literary language and elegy/mourning refer, a negation on which the force of each movement depends. In doing so, it will examine Roland Barthes’s elegiac reflections on literature, loss and writing following the death of his mother, in Mourning Diary (2009). Also discussed in the context of elegiac ethics is John Bowlby’s psychoanalytic understanding of loss, and the Orphic turn.

Chapter 2 examines the paradoxical and ethically problematic form of the eco-elegy by reflecting on my own experience of visiting Chernobyl as research for my elegiac novel The Counterpart. With reference to Timothy Morton’s essay ‘The Dark Ecology of Elegy’, this chapter argues that a more rigorous attendance to the varied meanings encompassed by the word “loss” is integral to developing an ethical poetics of eco-elegy.

Chapter 3 explores the implications of Morton’s argument that a melancholic
elegiac mode presents a more ethical mode of representing ecology in crisis, in
dialogue with the work of other thinkers within the environmental humanities. It
contends that such a mode must involve a greater attendance not only to the future
loss that is now irremediable due to global warming, but to our human culpability
and answerability in light of this loss.

Chapter 4 discusses Derrida’s metonymic ethics of mourning and
commemoration in relation to eco-elegy, in contrast to more traditional
psychoanalytic understandings of mourning that have influenced elegy and its
criticism. In dialogue with the work of Derrida and of select thinkers within
ecocriticism and creative writing studies, this chapter outlines a framework
through which to rethink an ethical poetics of eco-elegy. This chapter argues that
such a poetics would resist totalising the divergency of ecological loss, and the
others implicated in this loss, while recognising our human implication in, and
interconnection with, ecological reality. This ethical poetics is ultimately framed
in the allegorical context of reimagining the moment of the Orpheus’s turn from
lost Eurydice.
THE COUNTERPART

An excerpted novel

PREFATORY NOTE:

Where space constraints have required the omission of a significant section of intervening text, an explanatory note will appear.
I shall not decay, nor rot, nor putrefy, nor become worms, nor see corruption. I shall have my being, I shall live...

– Address to Osiris by the deceased, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, Ch. CLIV
I see him from behind. In his heavy coat, he is a dark shape in a white land without shadow. The sky is white; the ground is white. The horizon is uncertain. Although it could be any time of day, I sense it is morning. Against the bench, his back is a broad wall. His breath is all that moves, unfurling in vapour and disappearing in the air before him. He waits, opposite the five-storey block in a town where tourists don’t go. As trackers get closer to the animal, they must make sure they see it before it sees them. He has already seen her. He is taking his time.
The day I landed for the funeral, the headless figure of a woman was discovered off the coast of Israel. In baggage collection at Borispol, I passed her image on the news, in one frame falling, in another, lying on the sand. She fell from a cliff being excavated by archaeologists, and had to be raised from the waves by a crane, around which an audience assembled, as if for the resurrection of Aphrodite herself. Originally, this marble goddess had presided over the cliff-side Roman bath house which, after nearly two millennia, was disassembled in the same storm that caused her own fall. The statue would not have been revealed but for the unfortunate collapse of the ancient site, and there’s the paradox of history’s treasure hunt—had the bath house wall not been lost how much longer would she have languished unseen? In the footage she was weathered by the elements, and wanted not only for a head but for several fingers and a foot. Waiting for my luggage there before the screen, I recalled something strange I have often thought to be true, that beauty in distress is sometimes the most arresting kind. I thought then of my father, and wondered again if I would ever be able to divide his thoughts from my own, his triumphs and tragedies from mine. Of course, I know that there is a way in which to have a family at all is to share in a certain collective self. Yet my condition was somewhat different. For, ever since my father died, I had been haunted by the feeling that I was, in some unfathomable way, living his afterlife.

I had done nothing to help myself out of this predicament. In fact, for the previous five years, I had routinely positioned myself as the passive recipient of his posthumous orations. In more ways than one, they were my inheritance.

But I must begin at the beginning, and speak of another statue, and another place.

*
This is not my story. In telling it, I am acting on my ex’s last words to me before she left, for a sunnier state with an affable lesbian kitesurfer. She said to write it down, this history I had begun to trace with the obsession of those who long to know of origins. As much as it irritates me to heed her, here I am, pen in hand, alone in my father’s house, with an indolent Labrador for company and a freezer full of stroganoff.

Don’t we all, as egocentric children, long to know the story of how we, and thus the known world, came to be? I still feel the weight of my mother’s silences at the questions I asked her as a child. What was my father really like? How did she meet him? There was fury in those silences, although I was not its object. It was, I suppose, a fury of self-preservation. Like anything persistently withheld from a child, the history of my parents came to occupy a disproportionate space in my mental universe.

When I turned eighteen, I came into my inheritance—my father’s Melbourne house, an expired Toyota, an ancient artefact collection, and his papers. My father, lover of the relic and the record, kept diaries and wrote certain letters which remained unsent. The day I moved in, I found them, stacked and unassuming on the shelf above his desk. The same day, I discovered that in death, my father told me more than my mother ever would while alive. Yet, even when writing for himself, I have no proof that my father wrote the whole truth. In fact I doubt it. He was a man with a singular vision. And so in this exercise of reconstruction I have taken many liberties.

Reading on painting the other day, I came upon a quote from Braque: *Proofs weary the truth*. Whether or not he is right, the ‘proofs’ I have are not enough. What I do not know, I have supposed; I have grafted new branches from fact. Using my father’s writings and all I know of both my parents, these pages imagine a story I was never told.

*
PART ONE:

The Marine Venus

They met before the Marine Venus, Aphrodite aidoumene, the salt-worn goddess resurrected by sailors from the seabed off the west coast of the city. With the frequently obsessive attention to detail that marked Peter’s professional and private life, his personal diaries describe exhaustively the days that follow this meeting, and their bearing on his own mind and heart.

Picture an afternoon, during the late spring of 1988, in a museum on the Greek isle of Rhodes. That afternoon, inside a wide and echoing room, a shaft of deep light falls from a high window before which a tall man stands. The man is big-boned, with dark hair and a straight back. His regal face, of indeterminate age, bears the beginnings of a beard; his blue eyes direct a penetrating stare. His flared cheekbones and the warmth in his skin hint at some mystery in his otherwise European blood, a mystery of north or central Asia. Across the room, the light moves, as if reaching for its grave white host, whose eroded eyes, above her broken neck, in a head poised with philosophical dignity above her armless body, seem to look both everywhere and nowhere at once. Peter was still dazed by the ancient object exhibits, until he found the statues, and among them, in a farther room, this giant white woman in the corner toward whom the sun leans. He has seen her before. Perhaps it is like greeting an old friend. Decades ago, when the memory of fish was fresh on her stone, Lawrence Durrell was moved to remark upon the genius of her presence being impossible to describe. As her creator would once have done, Peter shifts around, appraising every angle, and then he stops. She compels him to be still. He is lost in her face.
Hearing footsteps, Peter feels his time alone with her draw in. As other people enter, it occurs to him that he had almost missed the room. So does the design of chance become all the more marvellous for the events that follow.

Only one of the other visitors is as quiet as Peter. In his peripheral vision he sees her, having arrived with singular intent before Aphrodite. He shifts a little, his eyes still wandering along one eroded shoulder and truncated arm, imagining they are flesh. He hears a sigh. ‘Ah!’ says the voice. ‘She is far from home.’ He turns his head toward the voice, which is musical and hints of both wistfulness and wit, wondering of its mother tongue—Russian? Not Greek—and sees a small blonde woman with a battered camera at her neck, her hands thrust in the pockets of a quilted jacket that matches her hair. She looks back at him with an openness that seems to expect an answer. Her eyes are bright behind her glasses, which, he sees, now rest on her nose at an odd angle, likely owing to her habit of constantly moving them above and below her eyes in the act of looking. Unable to think of anything to say, he merely smiles, looks at her for perhaps a second too long, and resumes his efforts of committing the vision before him to memory. Frowning now, unable to truly see Aphrodite, he feels his eyes wanting to look back. While he resists his eyes, the real woman beside him seems to oscillate at the edge of his vision. Who is she? What is she there for? Questions echoing in his mind, he hears a sudden click before a bright light. Finally giving up on Aphrodite, he looks back. Her face is partly obscured. She is peering through the camera lens, her glasses balanced on her head.

‘Oh, devil!’ she says, fiddling with the settings, ‘The flashing.’ Intrigued by her choice of expletive, Peter wonders if she is talking in English for his benefit, for surely if she were in the habit of talking to herself in public she would do so in her native tongue. She sighs, glances at her watch, and rubs at her nose for a moment while appraising Aphrodite again, with one foot forward, before becoming utterly still. Without looking at her directly, he follows the line of her profile with his eyes. Her eyes remain on Aphrodite, as if it were possible to fathom her by looking. He senses the presence of a like soul, and smiles. By this time they are alone. Like Peter, the woman in yellow shows no interest in the other statues in the room. When, the next moment, his stomach begins to growl audibly, he feels it is his time to go, but then she speaks.

‘There is something about her, no? Everyone talks about the Aphrodite
Bathing in the other room, but this one, in ruin, she sticks in the mind. She has a better story to tell.’

‘I wish she would tell it.’

‘Ah, I could tell she had you too. May I ask you would have the time?’

She gestures to her wrist, as though unsure he would understand the word.

‘Oh, yes,’ he says, glancing at his own wrist. ‘The dead hour of three, precisely. Three o’clock.’

Before he has finished speaking she gasps and picks up her bag, exclaiming under her breath in a foreign language, something like ‘aiy boch’, and then, ‘Oh, I am late, very late. Excuse me. Good day’, leaving Peter and Aphrodite alone once more.

* 

That day, leaving the museum, Peter’s heart begins to race. For hours afterward, panic revisits him, pricking his skin with cold heat, causing him to forget his lunch bill, and later, while browsing in a bookstore, to walk directly into an elderly man. Repeatedly along the route back to the hotel, his mind draws forth the woman’s face. With the cool night comes a dread he has known before. Awake in bed in an atmosphere that feels sentient and impregnable as skin, the questions come, eschewing conscious thought. Why had he not asked her name? Why had he not made her stay?

* 

I have never written much myself, not since the diaries, long lost now, of a few desperate childhood years. The world doesn’t need another memoir, and I feared indulging my introversion. The validation of writing is seductive, and, as my ex was so fond of reminding me, I am egotistical enough. Then, not long ago, between jobs, during a period when the darkness in my mind had begun spread like ink over our lives, she told me to either see a psychiatrist or instead see her walk out the door. When I knew for sure that she was serious and my arguments pointless, I found myself sitting on a couch opposite Dr. Goldman.

Upon greeting him and explaining my reason for being there simply as
surrender to my girlfriend’s ultimatum, I remember a long pause, during which I believe he expected me to elaborate. Instead I stared rather vacantly at his dense ginger beard. The fact that he was wearing a bow tie unnerved me further, as my instinctive mistrust of those who wear them has always been warranted in the end. And yet I knew my silence was insolent—the poor fellow hadn’t asked me to come. Finally, he began to pose tentative questions to which I replied. When he asked me to tell him about my parents, I asked what he wanted to know. I told him I didn’t see what use reciting the facts of my parents would be. I told him it was just the way I was wired, and that this spell would pass when I was busy again. ‘Since you’re here, I’d like you to try talking anyway,’ he said. After all, even if I didn’t believe the way I was raised had a large hand in shaping me, surely I believed that the facts of my genetic make-up were entwined with my parents’. ‘I believe it all,’ I said. ‘I just don’t see how talk will change it.’ In the end, I talked, of course, to appease my girlfriend, to pass the time, and to see what wisdom three hundred dollars might buy me. The words came out almost before I had to think them. As I recited what I knew, I felt the vacant weight of everything I didn’t know. The facts sounded strange even to me.

I saw Dr. Goldman for as long as it took to realise that psychiatric sessions were not going to save my relationship. At the end of our first session, after I had recounted a hundred curiosities about my parents and noted by his expression that he no longer thought I was making it up, Dr. Goldman set me an exercise. It was simple. ‘When you’re alone, write down everything you told me, then keep writing until it’s not so easy,’ he said. While I met these instructions with a nod, I had no intention of following them. I had stood before the weight of tortured paper my father left behind, and leafed through the records of his days, mundane and occasionally extraordinary. He certainly wrote with a kind of flair, and who am I to know what good obsessive documenting did him when he was alive? I had read it all intently, grateful for his legacy. I just didn’t want to follow him.

Eventually, Ann did walk out the door, and she fired a parting shot. It left me finally unable to let my family history rest. Because a small revolution begins in the mind of a person who learns they are to bring about new life. Mortality bares itself, more insistent than before. The self shrinks in the wide arms of History. The mind is nudged on beyond its own death to ask, what will I leave behind? This revolution is only more dramatic in one who never longed for or expected
parenthood. That is where I found myself, one year ago, when Ann dropped the news, with a tone of perfunctory resentment, as we were clearing up the dinner dishes: ‘I’m pregnant’. As if I’d forgotten the bins again, or missed her birthday dinner. It was the result of one of our recent attempts to find each other, after months of tension. During that period, she had come to blame her persistent passive-aggression on her contraceptive pill, instead of the obvious culprit, which was her unhappiness. Knowing the futility of engaging her in argument (I lost my train of thought and grew glaze-eyed just as she got going, in an athletic verbal combat that made her glow), I agreed that she should stop the pills. She was on them because I don’t function well when gloved, and that particular occasion, having both drunk too much cheap chardonnay at her brother’s ridiculous buck’s night, I went glove-free. I fucked her on the lounge-room floor without a condom, and would be called to face the consequences.

My growing apathy toward my relationship at that time had frightened me in an abstract way. I tried to remember why we were together, and saw a union born of various corresponding factors, all of which might have easily been found in another woman and another man. I loved Ann, until I began to question the feeling, and then to forget the feeling itself. I felt I was moving through a fog, and when I interacted with other people or performed activities other than staring through the window of my father’s study, it felt like there was a lag between my brain and my limbs. I was exhausted, and began, in my more fatal moods, to anticipate being left alone with a longing I knew I would regret. But I was under the rule of Saturn. My body felt too heavy to carry, my thoughts devoured me, and I wondered whose life I was living. When Ann finally left, the fog closed in completely. I became what we had both feared, and, in my abandonment, found in self-destruction a hideous satisfaction. One day bled into another in the silence of my body in the house until hunger and despair drove me out on slow-motion expeditions to Coles for cornflakes and instant noodles. I grew to know the engorged, hallucinatory feeling of sleeping through the day, like the downside of a sugar high. Life had become timeless. I ceased to recognise my bearded self in the mirror. I had fantasies of Ann bumping into me in the liquor section, beholding my gaunt body and haunted face, pleading for forgiveness. At times, I imagined her doing so too late, after reading my obituary in *The Age*, over breakfast in the Queensland kitchen of her betrayal. In theory, I knew that I needed to return to
work and study. In reality, I had my dead father’s house and money. In the end, I made a bargain with myself.

One empty evening, long after I had ceased seeing Dr. Goldman, when there was nothing sufficiently mindless on television and the sky had released a downpour worthy of the tropics, I decided to humour his idea of a homework session. When I sat down to ‘write until it wasn’t easy’, the words came fast. For as long as my hand kept moving, I felt calm dawn in my mind. When the words stopped, and the questions which had always been there came to gather with an urgency I had never before admitted, I knew I must piece together for myself the full story of my birth.

* 

Peter wakes late the next morning, with a listless feeling he hopes motion will cure. He takes the route from his hotel along the quay, beyond which ferries float like giant icebergs, filling the air with the honking of geese. He buys a pretzel from a bakery stand, and sits on a bench facing the sea, watching the coffee drinkers, the spires of the cathedral, the market sellers erecting the day’s wares. After filling his lungs for a few minutes with the ocean air, he reloads his old Minolta and heads for the museum for the second time in as many days. He had forgotten to take a photograph of Aphrodite the previous visit, and intends to review the ancient object exhibits.

Arriving at the entrance to the main wing of statuary in which Aphrodite is housed, Peter stops a moment to stand in the enormous cathedral-like hall of the former hospital. There, pale light filters in diagonal streams from the highest vaults to the floor, in which more minor relics cover the walls—stone reliefs and tablets, which are not too diminished by the lack of electric light. The first room, with the miniature Aphrodite Bathing, is empty but for an attendant slouched in a chair in the corner reading a magazine. Upon his entrance, she looks up and, apparently finding no reason for suspicion, resumes reading. From the angle of his approach, the adjoining room looks similarly empty. The sun, which had been so bright that morning and the previous afternoon, has recently faded, leaving the room bathed in an even, shadowless light.

It is only as Aphrodite in her corner rears into view—looking, he notes with
some disappointment, as if she hasn’t moved in the night—that he sees the figure standing still before her, partly obscured by a large bust of Dionysus. As he moves closer, he sees the figure’s yellow hair and jacket.

Peter pauses behind Dionysus, and for a moment it seems there are only statues in the room. He notices the ornate clock on the far wall, and wonders if it’s wrong. The hands rest at three o’clock, later than he thought it to be, and the same time as the previous day’s meeting. His eyes return to the woman and squint, as if to check his vision is true. He had not expected to see her again, yet there she is, before the great white lady of the Aegean, as if waiting for him. Somehow feeling his eyes, she finally turns, a haunted look on her face which passes.

‘Oh! Hello.’

‘Hello.’

‘She has put a spell on us,’ says the woman, laughing.

Peter nods, trying to think of something to say. Finding nothing, he peers at the statue through his camera lens, composing the shot. He feels her watching him, and worries he is being rude. Common odds do not favour the repetition of chance meetings. If she leaves now, there will not be another. When he has taken the shot, he turns back to her. She is turning over a book pulled from her bag.

‘What brings you to Rhodes?’

‘Oh, well—’

She is surprised, and stalls, her lips parted for speech, as if waiting for the answer. ‘Ah—I—I don’t remember.’

She turns to him wide-eyed, as if to share her shock, and speaks in the slowness of shock.

‘This book is in Russian.’

She pauses, gazing into the middle distance.

‘I speak Russian.’

She gazes back at Aphrodite, as if this fact is sinking in. She turns to Peter, a strange light in her eyes. She speaks her words now with grave certainty.

‘I was on a train.’

Her eyes implore him to tell her that some truth she now knows isn’t so. Her hands are clasped tight together in front of her chest. She takes a breath.

‘Did you know I’d be here? Have you seen me before? Tell me, do you know who I am?’
Peter blinks, waiting to understand.

‘What? I didn’t know you’d be here; it was coincidence. I wanted to take some photos.’

The woman’s eyes are distant. With a short breath, Peter shakes his head.

‘Why am I explaining this? We’re strangers. The first time I saw you was yesterday, right here. Don’t you remember?’

‘I remember yesterday. But—I’m sorry, you’ll think I’m so strange. But I don’t remember before the train.’

She has begun to speak into her hands. Peter is worried she is about to fall over. Drawing a slow breath, she shakes her head.

‘Ah! What is my name? Aiy boch, I don’t remember who I am.’

*
Note on omissions:

In the intervening text, Peter, transfixed by the strange woman’s striking resemblance to his beloved, long-dead and desperately missed twin sister Klara, and deducing that she is suffering from amnesia, decides to help her rediscover her identity. (The woman’s state of amnesia accords with that of the rare ‘dissociative fugue’, entailing a sudden travel from home, and often afflicting victims of extreme stress and trauma.) In the interim, Peter suggests that for convenience, he call the woman by the pseudonym of “Klara”, to which she unwittingly agrees. Klara’s lack of identity papers, combined with Peter’s mistrust of Greek beauracracy and his fears that the woman, if a Soviet citizen, could be charged with defection, compels him to take her by ferry to Athens, where he procures her a false passport.

Peter, a Siberian exile and naturalised Australian based in Melbourne, is by profession an art conservator (and frustrated artist), on leave from work due to a heart condition. (Importantly, Peter is also a religious man, adhering to his own eccentric blend of ancient Egyptian beliefs in an afterlife, and shamanic mysticism. Additionally, he holds to a belief that he was, in a prior life, an ancient Egyptian priest.) Having planned to travel on to Italy for a conference, Peter ultimately compels Klara to follow him for an adventure, during which she will ostensibly be his portrait model, and he her guide. Throughout this journey, as the two grow closer, and Peter sketches Klara with increasing frustration, Peter confronts the dangers of his own desire to recover the loss of one being through the image of another, and Klara realises the dangers of her dependency on him.

Ultimately, Peter’s escalating desperation, to obtain a lasting likeness of Klara’s face, leads to a radical decision.
PART TWO:

The Mould

It is during the opera in Bari that Peter decides to make the mould of Klara’s face.

It is strange, the way that every faculty of a person can know an act is wrong, while never shaking their resolve to commit it. From the moment the idea occurs to him, Peter knows that it is as good as done, despite registering a feeling of disgust which, depending on your point of view, might by a minor degree render him a better or a worse man for having had the feeling at all. He will make a cast of her face, and it will be his masterpiece: this he thinks sitting beside her at the Teatro di San Carlo, at the opera Norma, during the exquisite warbling of ‘Casta Diva’.

If there is any lost memory of those weeks which you have cause to mourn, it was that velvet evening in the teatro, the vibration of the soprano in your chest, your hands holding themselves tight in the lap of your new red dress, your eyes alive with saltwater. I was conscious of your breathing, the quickening rise and fall of your breast, your face transformed by emotion. The plan descended like a note of the music, independent of me and asserting its right to life. Your face, Klara. It was the face I had been looking for.

So writes Peter of that night, in a letter to Klara that was never sent.

*
After the opera, they sit in their room, the laughter of late-night diners in the lane outside. The arias still in their heads, they eat pizza at the table with a bottle of wine. Peter invokes their successful evasion of the sea port officials as reason for this particular indulgence. Peter will blame what happens on the wine. For having drunk the wine at all, he blames the drawing he made of Klara that afternoon.

Like the others before it, the drawing taunted him with the possibility of yielding to the glorious potential of a true representation, while always failing to do so, as if it were merely his own lack of technical skill that failed to manifest what was so near. There was no joy to the lines. They would not abide him, and his veins hummed with wine. He had tried. He held the pencil with excruciating alertness to every possibility of the white page. She was still, she was patient; a willing sitter. She didn’t seem to mind Peter peering at her when he had a pencil in hand, and he was too timid to face her as fiercely without his artist’s props. At times he noticed amusement in her eyes. The sketchpad between them mediated these encounters in an elegant way. Like the configuration of a pieta, the staging of the portrait follows an old arrangement. Instinctively they knew their parts, and awkwardness was eschewed by having the point in common of that frail page.

Again that night, Peter’s pencil does not heed his eyes. It follows its own desires. His first lines, tracing her shape and pinning her down, lose their certainty in the detail, in the darker deciding line. For although Klara is there, breathing, a metre from him, it is never that face which looks back at him from the page. There he sees only a tortured matrix of lifeless lines. She does not agree. She sees his agitation, and offers him praise: Amazing, to achieve all this with a little lead. So true to life, like a photograph! But Peter shakes his head and spits that it is all just craft, learned trickery, arithmetic. For a while Klara had tried to save her portraits before Peter could shred them, keeping several in a roll that grew cumbersome to carry, until, seeing Peter’s irritation, she surrendered them all to a public bin. Sometimes she notes a wild look to the portrait’s eyes, a nose that is not her own, a larger mouth. The woman in the drawings looks like Klara’s close relative; she is not Klara. Sitting by sitting, she watches the woman’s face grow darker.

Klara had arrived in Peter’s life suddenly. Although he hardly dares to think of it, his superstition dictates the likelihood of her leaving in a similar manner. In that event, he would need more than an ordinary memento by which to remember her. Peter has photographs of Klara, but photographs are not enough. There is a
kind of seeing that is only summoned in the effort of creating a representation with one’s own hands. And yet neither are the portraits enough. Peter longs to re-create her with his hands, to discover her in three dimensions. Only then could he truly commit to memory the dimensions of her face, the lineaments of her smile, the aspect of her gaze, the way she holds her head. Every material image of Klara is an aid to the image Peter aims to sustain in his mind.

* Drawing Klara that night by the blue-lighted window, Peter observes the alarm in her face long before he connects it with any behaviour of his, figuring that she is perhaps musing upon her situation. In his efforts to define the fall of shadow on her nose, in relation to her eyes and lips, his breathing becomes savage, his lines too hard for the paper to sustain. Finding no hope in this, his hundredth attempt to render her, Peter tears the page off its clipboard, and with slow deliberation, crushes it in his hands while looking out the window at the night. Her voice comes to him as if through a pane of glass.

‘Why is it never good enough? Why do you keep drawing me?’

He has walked over to the window, and stands before it with his glass of wine, feeling the air on his face. Behind him, Klara makes a despairing sound.

‘Oh, god. What are we doing here? I’ll never remember who I am, and who on earth are you? You are a man who wants to help me, but will not say why. You draw me over and over and destroy every attempt!’

Even then, as Peter senses the absurd comedy in their predicament, he is grave. Turning from the window, he finds himself looming before her, his face above hers blocking the light, close enough to feel her breath. For several seconds he does not speak, but only stares at her, inches from that face which forever resists capture. Possessed, he snarls like a strange animal.

‘You know why I draw you.’

She shrinks back in her chair like something hunted, before he pins her against the wall, knowing the wrong he is committing even as he commits it. So does a man at times find himself looking on from without, in the moment of an act he will regret. Finally he is near her, near enough to feel her heat. He wants to simply absorb her, it is an insane, mindless hunger to which no part of his rational
intelligence can speak. Finally she whimpers, and slips out of her chair from one side, ducking under his right arm and stopping only when she reaches the door.

‘I don’t know why you do it! Who are you?’

It is only then that Peter returns to himself to realise what he has done. The door shuts. He does not go after her.

*

How does Peter spend the hours that follow? Perhaps he seeks solace in another bottle, after which he surrenders to the oblivion of a dreamless sleep. Perhaps he sits, vacant-eyed, in front of late-night Italian TV. Perhaps he wanders the streets of Naples, searching.

In any case, when he wakes the next day, his eyes still around the shape of her jacket on the chair. It takes longer for his mind to register the vision than it does for his eyes to see it. He feels like a victim of head trauma who, waking from his coma, becomes cognizant of the event having happened at the same time as realising that, in the face of uncertain odds, chance has granted him reprieve, life has been restored to him when it might have been denied. This surge of fortune leaves Peter numb. The jacket on the chair declares that he is one of Chance’s chosen ones, before he has had time to contemplate the prospect of loss: because Klara has returned, when she might have vanished. He feels the entrance of a deep relief, intravenous and pure. Of course she has returned. It is no victory of luck, no gesture of forgiveness. At this point I would like to believe a deep repulsion for his own self causes Peter’s gut to lurch. She has nowhere else to go. Craning his neck from where he lies in bed, he sees her figure in the bathroom doorway, shuffling from the sink and fiddling with her underwear, careful even then of not disturbing him. Suddenly, he feels exquisitely alert, as if every nerve and synapse were attending to his forming decision. If he does not attempt to carry out his plan at that moment, he sees that the chance may not come again. He lies in bed for several more minutes, thinking, feigning sleep. There is only one way to do it, and it all rests on Klara accepting a cup of tea.

*
That morning, Peter sedates Klara with his anxiety medication. He does it for accuracy. He does it for fear of her opinion of him, for fear that, had he asked instead of drugged her, she would have refused. Desperation invents reasons why a violation in the most horrendous taste is, in fact, a justifiable and relatively harmless act. She could do with a rest, evidently she is not sleeping well, and how could he, in all his suffering, not be entitled to her face? For it is not even her face, the living original, that he is asking to possess. He is already settling for second-best, although he looks upon it then as a kind of carbon, a security against the worst disaster. A true copy is what he seeks, whose truth he can trust the more for having lifted the mould from her skin. No portrait, the poor imitation by his hand and eye approximated so far from the living original, would suffice. The coincidences, the uncanny parallels, take advantage of his every latent religious weakness and his grief, to leave him convinced there is some divine will in her being sent to him, granting him this devious act, with Vaseline and dental alginate and plaster bandage. *Forgive me, but it was so easy,* he implores in an unsent letter. *You awakened like an angel after it all, without a trace of accusation in your face.*

Klara doesn’t take hold of the cup for several insufferable minutes. When she does bring the cup to her lips, she drinks steadily, without hesitation, until the tea is gone. The effects do not take long.

Of course, Peter doesn’t know what to expect. He has given her what he thinks is a conservative amount of sedating drugs based on her body type—small and light. He doesn’t consider the fact that the wine from the previous evening may remain in her system, or what dangers this new cocktail in her body might create. It is one of the singular moments in Peter’s life when the primitive forces of instinct and impulse eclipse entirely his rational mind—those faculties of self-preservation and caution, and his adherence to the most rudimentary of moral codes.

If he feels pity or horror as he undertakes these deceptions, it is bearable, with the object of his desire so close at hand. If he feels regret as he watches her finish the last of the tea and place her cup down, it is the passing regret made hollow by
the fact that given the chance he would only do the same again. What he feels is relief, and the charge of anticipation in knowing that soon, she will close her eyes. Face to face at last with this potential in himself, he is surprised to feel no great horror, understanding, as he does, the nature of the decisions he has made and the power he has abused. What horror he feels is academic.

He has the feeling of being propelled outside himself, toward a kind of edge. How is he to proceed? He has succeeded in entering a rather arbitrary dose of drugs into Klara’s veins by way of a very sweet cup of tea. Is it enough, is it too much, or is it, as he hopes, the perfect measure to avoid the risk of either alternative? While looking into his cup and contemplating what to say while he waits, he hears a noise.

Without a word, Klara has quite gracefully pitched forward in her chair until her brow hits the table’s edge. It is more than he could have hoped for. After a moment, he takes the opposite seat, lowers his face to hers, sees her eyes are closed and reaches out his hand to her mouth to check she is still breathing. He marvels at how, with only audacity in the place of skill, he has achieved perfectly his desire—a Klara deep in sleep, a sleep which no gentle manoeuvre of his is likely to disturb.

* 

After Klara’s head drops onto the table, Peter carries her over his shoulder to the middle of the room, and lays her on the floor beneath yesterday’s newspaper. He brushes her hair from her face as he has always longed to do, and fans it out like a halo, observing how much lighter it is than was his sister’s, before hiding it all beneath the complimentary shower cap. For her hairline, lashes and brows he is in need of grease. The hair conditioner won’t do. He searches both their bags and, finding no Vaseline, begins to wonder about the pats of butter in the fridge. The pharmacies are closed, and he doesn’t want to go searching with her there on the floor like the victim of an unfinished murder. And then he remembers the cream for his chronically dry hands. It works well enough, as does the pudding bowl filled with potpourri he steals from the hall.

Crouching over her on the floor, like a loving mother, he wipes away the fine thread of drool running from the corner of her mouth, sets to mixing the alginate
in the right proportions, and laments the fact that he will have to apply it with too small a brush. He is too paralysed to scream when, at the first slimy touch of the alginate, Klara opens her eyes, moans, and rolls her head to the side. Peter has not contemplated this turn of events, and had it not been a momentary resurfacing of consciousness, there is little he would be able to do, short of delivering a concussive blow to her head. Although it seems like an eternity, it must in fact be only moments before he sees her eyes roll white and close again. Although relieved beyond measure that she is no longer looking at him with the vacant eyes of a sibyl, poised over her as he is, wielding his hook-ended modelling tool and clad in the disposable raincoat he packed in case of bad weather, he is all the same concerned that this is a bad sign, a sign of her body’s sedation taking a dangerous turn. For this reason, and because he cannot be sure she will not wake again, Peter compromises his procedures and begins to apply the alginate with haste, having realigned Klara’s head. The pink goo drips thick down her face. He steers it swiftly from her nostrils, into each of which he has inserted a piece of soft drink straw to ensure the clear passage of air. He cuts the bandage with fervour, and begins to lay it on like sandwich spread.

He doesn’t allow it time to adequately dry. His nerves are shot, his courage gone. For a moment he employs the hotel hair dryer in speeding the process but abandons this from worry the heat will re-melt the alginate beneath. None of this is good for his heart, which is lurching like a hunted thing. Resigned to the ruination of his plans, his risks for nothing, he removes the mould and lays it down, where it collapses completely in the effort to sustain its own weight.

With a series of moistened tissues and a towel, gentle so as not to disturb her, Peter then begins to clean and dry her face. When he no longer sees a trace of pink sludge, he removes the makeshift newspaper bib he has tucked into her collar, and gathers into his arms for the first time the exact weight of his life’s desire, resisting the urge to extend the exquisite grief of holding her for any longer than it takes to reach the bed and lay her down.

When finally he turns his eyes from her sleeping face, he looks for a moment upon the sorry evidence of his deception—the pudding bowl of solidifying alginate, the pink-spattered business report, the abandoned modelling tools, the head-shaped lump of the mould, smelling of strawberry alginate, which seems to regard him with wounded and imperious distaste. Having collected everything but
the tools in a plastic bag, he hurls it over his shoulder, descends the stairs like a burglar and throws it in one of the laneway bins.

* 

That night, Peter had forgotten to close the curtains of the double window, and in the morning his eyes open to a light so golden it is as if the dawn had distilled itself into that single room alone.

For a moment he is blinded. He turns his head toward Klara’s bed, and rests his eyes on her bright hair, falling from the edge of her pillow on the far side of the room. He moves onto his side and watches the top of her sleeping head, bitter pieces of the previous day re-joining.

It is only when she finally stirs, her arm abandoning the covers and dropping to the side of the bed, that he realises he has been holding his breath for a sign that he is not a murderer as well as a fool.

It is hours before she wakes. He wants to buy some bread for their breakfast, but cannot risk leaving her alone in case she decides to leave again. Instead, he lies in bed, attempting to amuse himself with the crossword in the previous day’s paper, the range of which far outstrips his holiday Italian. It must sustain his attention somehow, because he does not notice Klara waking until he sees her before him.

He raises his eyes from the paper slowly, knowing but not believing what he will see. Because what he sees is Klara, blank-faced but for eyes that seem in that moment to have blackened overnight, standing there without clothes. The light picks out the down along her arms, which hang limp by her sides, caressing the curve and rise of all her angles with shadow in a liquid line. Knowing that she is waiting for him to speak and possibly growing cold, Peter forces his eyes to travel several times from her head to her toes, in order to preserve that chiaroscuro, and having done so, remains without words. She draws a long breath.

‘If this is what you want, okay. But no more drawings.’

Her voice is soft and flat. Peter removes his glasses and looks at his hands, comprehending her words, feeling hot shame spread like an ink stain though his body. She has not taken her eyes off him. Now the words come without thought, although he can hardly speak.
‘I’m so sorry, Klara. No more drawings. Please, put on your clothes.’

She stands there, unmoving, for another long moment, during which he continues to fiddle with the glasses in his lap, before turning from him and walking back to her side of the room. Peter would never before have believed what relief seeing her clothed could induce in him. Several minutes later, she is sitting at the table in her old yellow jacket and jeans, her bag packed on the floor, pouring two cups of tea. Peter understands this for a truce of sorts, and determines not to take her grace for granted. When he takes a seat across from her she sets his cup down without looking at him. He takes a sip, waiting. What does she remember? For a moment she had seen him above her with a brush, like a deranged plasterer. He looks at her over his cup, furtive, hardly breathing. When she looks back at him, she gives a half-smile, her eyes clear, hiding nothing, it seems. Silently, Peter thanks his gods, before asking if she is hungry, and she nods. When they finish their tea, he stands, takes up their bags, and with Klara behind him, walks out the door, more uncertain than ever of what the coming days will bring.

* 

They speak little at the station. Perhaps, both feeling the injury of the previous hours to the fragile web that binds them, they are unwilling to risk further damage. I see them at the grey station that morning, in the smoky bar drinking coffee. The heavy presence of the proprietor colours their silence, as he carries out a long conversation on soccer with two customers glued to the morning television news. When they are seated opposite each other in window seats before a plastic table, looking out the window as the train departs, Peter explains that they are headed for the coast of Sorrento, and will travel the next day to Pompeii, the buried city, the city of statues.

The disaster of the mould occupies Peter’s thoughts for the entire journey. The fact that the cast was a failure should have been no surprise to him, considering the manner in which he approached it, which was one of deranged haste, with an amateur’s disregard for materials. It was a bitter irony that his desire to avoid administering Klara further sedatives, compelling the slapdash haste so against his nature, is also the reason he will be compelled to do it all over
again that evening. And so Peter resolves to allow himself one last chance. Failure is not an option. This is the night he will create, with a care unequalled in his crafting life, a mould so robust and precise that it will sustain multiple castings. For this one night, in view of the mould it will manifest, Peter will sedate Klara to the degree, and for the length of time, that perfection requires. Bearing immediate, uncanny resemblance to the creature it comes from, this second cast will justify the end of his hopeless drawings, resolve the inadequacies of photography, and, were it ever necessary, aid his unfaithful memory. Peter reasons that Klara herself will be better off for the successful fruition of the mould about which she will never know. Better off for the peace its presence, wrapped in gauze like a secret wound in his briefcase, will induce in him, her greatest and only ally.

*  

They arrive at Sorrento at noon, as the clouds begin to block the sun. Over panini and chatter at a trattoria by the station, something of the delicate balance is restored between them, the camaraderie of fellow travellers. If the feeling between them is not in reality as simple, their mutual hope for the day makes it so.

That night in a bed and breakfast, after a lamplit stroll along the Marina Grande and a dinner of spaghetti alle vongole, Peter makes Klara another cup of tea. Then, to the halting sounds of a busking violinist somewhere in the street below, raincoated and calm of mind, he obtains his final mould.

*
Note on omissions:

In the intervening text, Klara, who wakes the following day appearing to have no memory of the previous night, accompanies Peter to Pompeii. When, in the afternoon, Klara recalls moments of the previous night and questions Peter, he confesses and begs forgiveness. Horrified, Klara runs away, even as Peter pursues her through the ruins. After weeks of searching, Peter finally flies back to Melbourne and, grieving, resumes work, while receiving treatment for his heart condition. Four years later, however, when Peter wanders into an exhibition of work by a renowned Soviet photographer, he encounters an image of Klara in a recent photograph of a group of scientists at the site of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and sets out to find her.
PART THREE:

The Zone

An unspecified period of months later, through a series of leaps and setbacks and a variety of sources, Peter arrives in the town of a woman named Vera Yenin, whom he once knew as Klara. Her town is in the newly independent Ukraine, near Kiev. There she will meet Peter for what will feel like the first time, although it is of course the second. It is winter, 1994.

* 

Hers is a ground-floor apartment in a block which forms part of a larger complex in a nicer area of town, opposite a public park near the central square. All the same, there is a desolate anonymity to the place. The buildings are white, heartless and severe in the way of all buildings there. It is an ugly town. It is not what he would have chosen for Vera.

It is a short walk from the only hotel in town to Vera’s building. For three days, unable to sleep and gathering courage, he arrives at the park a little after sunrise. From a bench with binoculars and a thermos of tea, he watches her movements, knowing he is desperate, despicable and absurd. When he first sees her, closing her door in a blue coat, her gold hair tied back, Peter experiences a relief so vital it feels chemical, a surge of blood; a bright charge. It is almost enough to know she is near. But seeing her walking with purpose away from him in the direction of the square, he stands. From a distance of many feet, he shadows
her, feeling ashamed and yet justified somehow, if only for the fact that he once
helped her and has things to tell her; if only because she left him once when he
loved her.

* 

Along with other state agency workers, Vera takes the train to the Zone. When she
reaches the station platform, she waits until the train comes in, raising her coat
collar against the cold, and exchanging cursory greetings with a rosy-faced
woman and a man in jeans who looks foreign. From the edge of the platform,
Peter watches the train arrive, when Vera, amid a file of several others, flashes an
I.D. card at the official and disappears inside the train, to chug along the shaded
tracks, through the floodplains, to the fabled place where he cannot follow her.

For the next two days he shadows her along the same route, from home to the
station, growing by increments more brazen, venturing ever closer to her familiar
back, always returning to town once she has boarded. On the second day, as he
follows her onto the platform, Vera pauses mid-step, brings a hand to her neck,
and peers for a moment over her shoulder, as Peter, several paces behind her,
having also stopped instinctively, turns rapidly around to assimilate with the other
figures. Burning, he prays for her not to notice his retreat. He realises that finely-
tuned Vera has sensed more than he had given her credit for. For the time Vera is
at work, Peter walks the town, watching people in the square, eating salted
cucumber sandwiches in local bistros over the newspaper. The few words he
exchanges with shopkeepers and people on the street are Russian. It feels strange,
the pulse of that tongue returning. The second day, he takes the train to Kiev, a
city he had visited as a child but of which he remembers nothing. He visits St
Sofia and St Vladimir, the House with Chimeras and Independence Square; he
wanders the National Art Museum and Kiev Art Gallery, both of which house
icons of international significance. A manic afternoon.

Vera arrives home around a quarter to six, often with a bag of shopping. From
the park Peter watches her enter her building, and he watches for the lights he
knows are hers to turn on. On the second night, he walks closer to her building
and stands under a tree, looking at her window. He wonders how she spends her
nights. She seems to live alone. Having no-one to share meals with, does she cook
only simple things; soups and one-pot stews? Does she watch television or read books? What kind of ornaments line her shelves? What thoughts pass her mind?

* 

Having discovered Vera’s building, and, instead of knocking on her door, observing her for three days—Peter, on the evening of the third day, in the stale air of his pink rented room on the third floor, finally ends the letter which he has been writing in his mind and on paper since the day she disappeared. This letter is to be his introduction.

He is disappointed that it is an apartment he must approach. This is altogether more complicated than a freestanding flat or house with a private door or a shaded garden in which an observer might hide. There are more ways in which it might all go wrong.

* 

Before continuing this instalment in their story, I insert here the opening of Peter’s letter to Vera:

You want to know who I am.
You may call me Peter.

I am a specialist in the conservation of precious objects. It is a profession as marvellous as it is pernickety, traversing vast gulfs in civilisations and epochs through the conduit of a single object. I have always loved a good ruin. It is the art of repair that I have had to learn. Like most conservators, I wanted to be a maker. On weekends, I like to sculpt.

English is my second tongue, the language of my freedom, the code dividing my second life from the first. What more am I? I am this curious riddle: a Siberian in exile, and for many years, a naturalised Australian. I am a self-taught expert in Egyptology, and a long-time enemy of the former Soviet Union.

For all that I profess to be, you might also think me something of a liar. To that charge, I can only say this: should these pages contain the merest trace of a thing not based in fact, it is the folly of a man who believes it. Lies have no place in this account.
My enemy status is my own assumption, and doubtless the case, conferred by nothing more exciting than my desertion of a Soviet tourist group in the middle of Picadilly Circus in 1958. The secrets I possessed pertained entirely to the sovereign state of my own soul, and they were none that Stalin would pine for. Nonetheless, I’d wager it was a sentence of death in absentia for Peter Volkov, a sentence in which I perceived an appropriate poetry.

What of that young, deserting soul? I suspect little of import has changed. Socialism suited my temperament as little as Orthodox religion, which is not to say I had no love of God or country in my heart. Like many a romantic, I had a weak spot for the Romanovs. Those wistful daughters, imploring fate in their white lace. With Alexandra I shared a love of that presumptuous, bearded rustic called Rasputin, although likely of a different kind. It was with that seer-eyed giant of my own woodland that I aligned my mysticism. Find, at war and peace in me, the Old Believer, the gifted dreamer and the charismatic fraud. Discern at once the lineaments of a Decembrist in revolt, and a white guard, tsarist heart. Perceive in this same man the native shaman of the North, the lost royal child and the vital dictator certifiably mad. Read this and tell me I am not a passion-bearer.

You see I am prone to a kind of flight. Forgive me this.

I defected formally on September 4th, 1958, when a gentleman officer of the British Embassy, whose lopsided silver moustache will forever reside in my mind, informed me of the decision of that nation to grant me formal political asylum from the motherland. I was twenty, having lived all of those years in an apron of land to one side of the river Yenisey. So was I exiled from the land of exile.

Whether manoeuvred through torturous calculation or the wild seizure of opportunity, successful defection has always been something of an art. It was an endeavour I prepared for as a gambler, having lost everything, might prepare to chance his last dollar. It didn’t really matter, I reasoned, with the fatalism of young men. I never truly expected to succeed. It took me a long time to overcome the fact of my luck, which felt like an error some god had momentarily overlooked and might at any moment rectify. In any case, it was luck come too late. It took me a long time to get close enough to the fact to let it drop back, and try to garner something of what life there was on the other side. The reasons one has for calling a place home, the gatherings of a life, departed for me one day before I left, as simply as bone cleaned of flesh. My lungs still hold the air of ice and pine at the moment I knew how truly nothing remained for me, and decided that, if I could not be happy, I could at least be free.

But who am I to you? What right have I to demand you read this? Dear Vera, I have no right at all. I must hope that something else, curiosity if I flatter myself, or, rather more likely, alarm that I know your name, keeps you with me a little longer. I ask most
fervently that you do read on, whatever the reason. I have a story to tell, and it concerns you. Do not believe your memory when it marks me for a stranger. Mine is a name you once knew, and I aim to prove it.

The ancient Egyptian race understood the power of objects and the power of concentrated intent. They understood the intricate significance of the name. But more than anything, they knew the vital weight of the body in life, at the moment of death, and beyond, as the bearer and conduit of all those elusive components that manifest an animate presence. To understand this is to understand not only the Egyptians, but also myself.

For the time of which I will now write your name was Klara, the name I gave you, that day when, after Chance had you stop by a certain statue in Rhodes and cross my path, I returned to find you there once more. My intentions in these pages are many—to fashion a bridge to cross these vast hours, to see whether exorcising your ghost is possible, to test my mind—but most of all, to offer you my memory of those days in place of your own. Understand: I ask for nothing in return.

Today, your presence seemed pervaded by that weary radiance I always remembered you for, back when you were lost to yourself and without a real name. Yes, radiance: a kind of light the origin and mechanism of which, for all the time I have to watch you, I still fail to locate. Then, you knew not who you were, or what you had lived, and that was the native quality of your presence: radiance, your bare flame, such as saints in those Byzantine icons have, and yet earthy, changeful; human yet yours alone. Now, your identity for so long restored, my eyes perceive both the friend and the stranger, although to you I am surely only strange. Where before, your limbs were heavy with hesitation, you move with purpose now, within the known country of your existence, in the world, in your body and your mind. There is ever a bearing of gravity to your head. I see it is filled with things I do not know. You are a mystery anew, Vera, and I never tire of watching you.

Knowing where you live, being near your home, fills me with the kind of peace which is close to death. I am the philosopher who, finding the solution, can rest knowing he will never lose the way to the stone. Perhaps that is why this letter is so long. I wish to delay the disturbance I know I am to cause you. I feel my presence as an impending anachronism upon the most wonderful tableaux vivant, the scene of which changes as I follow its one constant. Often now I feel an ache, as bright and violent as the new blooms will be, here, when the snow melts. It is an ache which implores the gods of the coming spring for what feels to be a natural right: this old sceptre becoming what it was once in youth, this brittle stalk cleaving back to green, the bold young blade of a young man you might love. And then as you enter my line of vision again, the ache forgets its edge and
extends from me on this park bench, becoming another part of the luxuriant green dark.

Today is Saturday, and, after a week consumed in the intricate rituals that comprise a line of work you seem born to, and which remains ineffably strange to me, you moved through it slowly. You should live in a beautiful place. A wooden house with a broken white gate I would like to fix, shaded by willows and the assorted trees of an overgrown orchard. You should dry your clothes on a line strung between the willows, heavy with your colours, yellow and blue. There, you might wake late and bring breakfast outside to eat in an old cane chair, where I can see you, staring out through the apple trees. But instead you live here, in a hard new utilitarian town which does not honour you.

This afternoon, I saw you in the park. My heart stopped for a moment, believing you saw me watching you. But I realised eventually that you were not really looking anywhere, that your eyes had only been guided out by a tide of thought at which I could not guess. For a while you read a thin book with a green cover, sipping from your thermos, before resting the book in your lap and leaning back with closed eyes, your hands in your coat pockets. I sensed you never went entirely to sleep (how could you, in this cold!) but rather departed on a long daydream. After a while, you returned to your building, and I imagined what you did then. Perhaps you began something in the kitchen that smelled spicy and wonderful. Perhaps you were having your friend over, the short plump woman with the lusty laugh who must be your colleague. Would she make you laugh too? I can only imagine your solitude as a condition of your own choosing, and I wonder often about the reason. That you are devoted to your work is clear. I think you have come to cherish being alone, perhaps too much. Listen to me! This letter is filled with liberties.

For someone who believes herself alone, I have been struck by the composure with which you perform the smallest task. I include myself when I venture that the vast majority of humans become different creatures indeed in their private habitats, when they believe no one is watching. Our roles reversed, for instance, I can, most regretfully, perceive myself not hesitating to lope around, unshaven and half-clothed, performing base bodily functions such as belching and eating fried potato in a most ungentlemanly manner, leaving a city of detritus behind me, and generally projecting a deranged and half-wild air, most repellent and foreboding to a witness such as yourself, and a galaxy away from the less-instinctive impression you would find me straining for, should I have felt myself in your sight. From this angle, the fact that I am the spy and not the spied-upon becomes a mercy for us both.

I have been candid for a man too cowardly to yet approach you. Perhaps you wonder how a man as apparently sensitive and philosophical as I, has as yet ignored a central condition of the situation by which this account has found you; that of my watching you
unaware, at work and leisure, by day and night, for some time, a spy. It occurs to me that only insane optimism could entertain your ever reading this far. And yet what choice do I have but to hope you will hear me despite what I profess to have done, and if not forgive, then to in some part understand a man who, even before meeting you, had dreamt of your face. My choice to spy on you as I have this week is only the most recent instance of other choices made concerning you unawares, and which were, I must try to convince you, never true choices at all…

*

Let us now consider the aftermath of this letter.

In the morning of the fourth day, after Vera has left, at an hour which is uncertain—his courage having finally risen in the blue light of dawn, or, perhaps in the gathering chill of dusk—Peter waits, leaning against a wall near the door which had been so hard to find, holding the letter which had been so long in the writing. He laces and unlaces his shoes; rummages in his bag; eats an apple. He tries to be unassuming. When a man and a little girl come along the path, shopping in hand, and the man, fumbling with his keys, begins to open the building door, Peter is there behind them to slip inside, nodding politely at the man as he passes through.

Standing before the wall of numbered mail slots in the foyer which for an instant reminds him of funereal niches, Peter forces the letter—fat and buckled in an envelope which, though expensive, is too small—into number two. For a moment before leaving, he regards Vera’s mail slot, which looks like all the others, prim and unassuming, and which appears to be empty but for his letter. He wonders when she will find it, and how, if ever, she will let him know it has been found.

*

Has Vera noticed the tall shadow that crosses her window? Does Peter wait beyond her gate to see his letter in her hands? Peter’s diaries offer little about these early days. Shall we venture a supposition or two? When a supposition is
formed with patience by a sensitive imagination and an experience of its objects first-hand, it can hit the mark as surely as any other arrow. And so we proceed.

*

Peter does not see Vera receive the letter, but notices, the next morning, an alertness about her much sharper than before. That day he does not follow her. The next day is Saturday. Vera does not venture out. It is impossible from any of his vantage points to get a good view of her windows, but he imagines her, peering through the gauze to the trees beyond, as if to locate the man she knows is there. *She has read my letter*, he thinks. *She knows my name.*

Peter waits.

*

On the afternoon of the third day of waiting, a slip of paper appears, a small white flag improperly hidden beneath the leftmost ceramic pot by the entrance to her building, which he can see from the fence. He has been watching over this pot. It is the hiding place he suggested in the letter.

*

Peter, feeling hot and cold at once, wonders whether to wait until nightfall to retrieve what is his. Watching the white flag stir in the breeze, signalling for him to claim it, he surrenders to a rush of blood, and, brazen as a leopard, traverses her yard.

*

Beyond her gate once more, in safe possession of the note, he observes it to be so light that he might be holding nothing at all. It imparts no heat, triggers no
vibrational response in his nerve endings. He feels the need to hide. The leopard, sensing death, seeks the dark.

*

Further from her gate, having found the dark, he confronts the handwritten words she has given him:

If faith in sense is not first firmly set, if it does not prevail, there is nothing to which we can appeal in what we claim, by any form of mental reasoning, about the truth of things we cannot see.

*

He knows this is not her voice. It is some verse of the canon, by another mind. He has failed.

*

Empty of hope, forsaken by the code of words and having nothing more to lose, he chances his last card. He leaves a box at her door. Inside the box is a cast of her face. All that is left to do now is wait.

*

That evening, a scream. The next morning, another note:

Leave or I will call the police.

*
Beyond grief, he ponders this. He ponders the fact that the cast of Klara has failed him. He confronts the fact, a solid horizon impossible to shift, that he cannot leave.

* 

He returns to words. He leaves a note and a small package beneath the pot at night. For a moment, near her window, he sees a shadow. He hears voices from inside. The shadow is not hers.

* 

Vera reads this latest note in the morning after wresting it, along with the package, from her plump friend, an unsubtle woman who feels it infinitely better to dispose of such things unread.

I am sorry, Vera, for my macabre delivery. Frightening you was not my intention. I forget myself in these foolish ways at times. To me the mask is a thing of beauty, a treasure—it is also proof. Of course it is understandable that you might not view it this way.

Please accept, as a gesture toward my atonement, this pristine 19th Dynasty obsidian scarab of my favourite ancient race. Such were its properties that larger examples like this were frequently placed on guard over the hearts of the noble dead. In a museum once, you professed to me your fondness for these. Might I thus suggest that, should you feel in danger, you wear it as a protective amulet against me? Naturally, if there were any superstitious symbol my vigilant passion might respect, it would be Egyptian. And so you see, I hand you a tool to use in my sabotage. If this fails, you will appreciate its function as a suggestive paperweight.

Do you smile at these frail little jokes? I am not a man you need be afraid of.

It is my task now to tell you I cannot leave without the answers, which I ask for in your own words, to these questions:

Have you or have you not forgotten me?

If you have not, why did you vanish in Pompeii? Because of the mask or because of something else? If you have forgotten, do you believe what I tell you is true?

What has happened to you between that time and now?
For all I have done, can you forgive me?

If there is any condition for my leaving, it is your forgiveness.

*

Finally, a reply:

I am fascinated despite myself, to consider “an otherwise sensitive man”, who deposits a horror mask at the door of a victim whom he wishes not to frighten. Your actions betray your words of love. Your questions are beyond presumptuous. This whole business grows more absurd each day, the one virtue of this being that as the absurdity grows, my fear fades into something like amusement. Your last letter ended on a sweet note, entreatling me to forgive you god knows what with the intimation of future deceits into the bargain, the alternative to which I am left to infer being a lurking shadow beyond my gate for all eternity. There is elegance to your assuming the innocence of a child while coldly intending the full force of each word you write. I am not a fool. How can blackmail be a route to forgiveness? My forgiveness must mean less than you claim. When, at the beginning of your first letter, you told me you wanted nothing in return for my reading it, did you know it was a lie?

There. Much more than I meant to write, and a few questions of my own, to which I expect no satisfactory answers. In any case, Mr. Volkov:

I do not remember you.

Against my wishes, and with many reservations, I believe you.

I have lived a calm life of reasonable contentment, all things considered, working as a radiobiologist in various parts of the former Union, and that is all you need to know.

You have my full forgiveness and I wish you peace, but (here is my own clause) only if you stop your spying. I love my solitude as much as I hate it. Whether or not you are as vigilant as you claim, you have ransomed this solitude and left me with a pressing feeling I can’t escape, a feeling far from solitude or company. I see myself constantly through the nocturnal eyes of a nearby creature who will neither leave nor come inside. Something tells me that if our roles were reversed, you would find this solitude even harder to lose than I.

*
Sweet Vera, I thank you for your letter.

My blood is still charged from the knowledge that, despite remembering nothing, you believe me, even if you would rather not. You have the virtue of logic on your side, and, with the weight of all likelihood before you in my testimony and in your knowledge of your own history, no simple desire could facilitate your self-delusion. You do not know from what constriction my heart was freed in reading your words of forgiveness. Nor do you know what horror it causes me to be the source of your discomfort. You seem to know that solitude is, for me too, a scarab at the breast, a burden and a treasure. Perhaps it is a sign that we are more alike than you think.

If I say that I never intended to blackmail you, you will not believe me. In any case, without intending to, blackmail you I did. My actions betray my words only by force of desperation, which has lessened with your attention to my letters and with your forgiveness. Without wishing to free myself from fair judgement, might I suggest that I may be more innocent than you think? You must see that even if you allowed me this, it would cost me a measure of self-awareness in your estimation. Please rest assured that, even though it will require the most superhuman effort of will on my part, I will not remain much longer, and by my leaving your solitude will be restored.

Is it possible that when I wrote I expected nothing of you in return, I lied and told the truth at the same time?

Finally, I must venture this—I perceived in your letter the grounds for inferring that I might have reason to ask the question with which I will now end this letter. If, swayed by the hope that, regarding you, knows no exhaustion, I am mistaken, forgive me, but:

Dear Vera, is coming inside an option?

Nothing for a day.

*  

Oh Vera, where is your tongue? Because it is my nature and because we have no time, I speak without artifice or design. This is a rare occurrence among strangers these days, which startles, if not repels one accustomed to greater opacity in discourse of a deep nature. But you are no stranger to me. And it is because my words are so bare that you
must trust me. Please continue to respond, in your voice or in the voice of any other. While you hear me, I have hope.

I dreamed last night an old dream of Egypt. I was again sheathed in cotton, my own sail in the wind, the water beneath me a liquid mirror of a million reflections, including the nearing horizon I could not tear my eyes from. It was a horizon of ink, from which the source of all creation shone, burnishing the world. But the shadows were growing longer, Vera. The orange god was going down for night. I feel the truth of it in my heart.

*

That evening, a reply:

Where is it you sleep, being such a tireless spy? I realise I have been imagining a nearby earthen pit you have dug, from which you arise in the morning like a hare, nervous, round-eyed and quick. Then I realised it was far more likely you were at the Parkview.

I have decided, for better or worse, and probably for worse, that tomorrow at two you may knock on my door. At your knock I will open it, and you may hold out your hand for mine to shake, and come inside, and we will settle things that way.

*

The next day, at two o’clock precisely, Peter arrives at the door of her building. For a moment he stands there, straight and tall, regarding the paintwork without really seeing it. He is thinking of reality and dreams, of the face he has not seen at close range for such a time, and the question of what light the eyes inside will reflect him in. He raises his hand to press the buzzer, and lowers it again. He asks himself if he is ready, counts off the list of ways it might all go wrong, and draws energy from the heat beneath his solar plexus.

When finally he buzzes and she appears, opening the door, they face each other for a moment in motionless silence, she in the doorway, he on the step. With both hands, he holds out the thirsty lilies he has brought her, which she takes, without expression or thanks, standing aside for him to enter, like a figure of wood. Neither has yet said a word. Their hands do not shake. She leads him to her apartment a few paces left of the main entrance and pauses at the threshold. Standing there to the side is a tall middle-aged man, who looks at Peter.
inscrutably from behind his glasses. Vera looks at the man for a moment, and
nods, as if to dismiss him, and says, ‘Thanks, Yuri’. With a polite smile, the man
disappears into the adjacent apartment. Why should I be surprised if she is on
guard, thinks Peter. Letting him in is a leap of faith. Finally, looking at him for the
first time with a wary half-smile, she gestures him through her open door.

*  

Her apartment, which opens onto a lounge, has the same shade of apricot carpet as
his hotel room, and is similarly sparse. Vera’s rooms betray little. Following her
down a hall to the right of the entrance, he hears his feet scuffing softly, thinking
of how they are scuffing on her floor, of all floors. Because the moment is at once
real and unreal, and passing too fast, he fights the instinct to pause right there in
the hall, and instead rests his gaze on her back. He recalls the hesitant grace of her
gait, the weary way her hips sway in walking, and confirms how this hasn’t
changed.

The apartment is larger than he expected. It glows in the dim afternoon, with a
soft light made rosy by the pinkish tones of its furnishings, and by the many
lamps. Books are the only other element of her apartment to diverge from tight-
lipped anonymity. In odd corners of the lounge and laundry, they form forgotten
pedestals. Klara favours non-fiction—books on plants, chemistry, Platonic and
Epicurean philosophy.

He follows her to a small white kitchen that smells of lemons and looks out
through a window onto the back of the block, where the road is partially obscured
by a few young elms. The table, spread with a white lace cloth, bears a vase of
snowdrops and a teapot. Glancing at him briefly, she draws back a chair and lifts
her palm, inviting him to sit, before turning to the cupboards above the sink.
Carefully, her back to him, she arranges the lilies in a jug, and leaves it by the
sink. He hears her breathing deeply. Then, with slow deliberation, she sets a china
cup and saucer before each chair, seats herself opposite Peter, and looks at him
directly. It is a look of limpid yet inscrutable appraisal. She seems relieved.
Evidently, she is not about to be pinned to the floor or clubbed over the head. A
moment later, as she pours the tea, he wonders what challenge is to be read in the
gaze he is still seared by. He feels like a child as she fills his cup, wordless with wonder, telling his fingers not to fidget in his lap, thinking of her nearly humorous calm before his barely held-in heart. In all the time he has waited for this moment, he entertained the possibility of many things, but never, truly, her taking it all for a joke. Her intake of breath cuts his thoughts. She is leaning back in her chair. He is unprepared for the verbal rush, the dissonant convergence of icon and embodiment.

* 

‘So you are my spy.’

In a rush, he remembers her voice, the charm of the husk hiding the high, clear tone. She speaks in Russian, and so he follows. After a momentary struggle with some weaker instinct, the corners of her mouth turn him a smile. He only sits, expressionless and intent, knowing it is not his turn. In the white room that smells of lemons and bread, there is an electricity which seems to administer to his cells a change. He is recalling the feeling of being twenty. As if hearing his thoughts, she speaks again.

‘My spy is younger than he gives himself credit for. Have I changed much?’

Slowly, he inhales. He has realised she is enjoying this, and wonders then if she has done all along, and if not, just what has changed. His voice, when it comes, is distant and strange.

‘Your hair is shorter. Your speech is surer.’

Nodding as if pleased, she holds out her pack of cigarettes, and, when he shakes his head, lights with a match the one she puts between her teeth. He has not, even having watched her as Vera, accounted for this self-possession, so different from his Klara.

‘This really is, you must admit, an interesting situation. You’re lucky I have a curious nature.’

She lowers her gaze to the table, perhaps waiting for him to speak, as her fingers flick ash onto her saucer. He can think of nothing to say. She settles for a question, and asks him how he found her. He tells her how he recognised her in the background of an Andrei Maschev photograph.

‘You were one of the scientists collecting muskrats in the Zone. This is the
town of the Chernobyl workers. When I got here I checked the local directory.’

She says nothing, glancing at the table and, for a moment, pinching her lip. After a few seconds in which they each drink their tea, Vera again leans back in her chair and sets upon him the most earnest gaze he has yet seen. He senses how clearly she sees him, and how utterly pointless would be an attempt to hide.

When she takes in a sharp breath and speaks again, he experiences it as a kind of launch, an almost nautical pledge of faith when the ship, deciding it is time, departs from the harbour, pointed at an as-yet invisible horizon.

‘Your letter, Peter, your letter. How does one answer such a letter?’

Her voice is at once playful and stern. For a moment her head turns to the side, and then toward the window behind. Peter thinks of a bird.

‘I considered the question. I decided that an answer from me was not what you waited for. You call that pile of paper a letter only for lack of a better word. How could it need a footnote from me?’

She looks at him for a moment with narrow eyes, letting out a sigh and tapping ash onto her saucer. Peter, who has been alternating between glancing at her and a particular painted flower on his teacup, shifts in his chair, taking it for granted that this question requires no answer. Vera, having twice turned her saucer around in thought with the same hand that holds her cigarette, the other pressed to her mouth, leans forward suddenly, one elbow on the table and her chin in hand. She speaks with slow precision, looking at the table, looking at him, each quiet sentence pulled forth as if from a deep pool of difficult truth.

‘When you track animals and spend much of your time alone, in a recently Communist country, you know when someone’s following you before you see them. That was a despicable thing to do.

When I found your letter I was relieved to at least have a name for that faceless figure at the station. And I saw you also had a name for me—two, in fact. Reading your letter, I suspected the only answer your ears could hear was the one you might discern in the echo of your own voice. Time will tell if I am wrong. Your words inspired my fear and fascination in equal measure. You called me by name, you said we had met in Greece beneath a statue’s gaze!’

For an instant, incredulous and on the verge of laughter, she hid her face in one hand, before shaking her head and resuming with a half-smile.

‘Shortly after which you drugged me in order to make a cast of my face, that
lovely cast I had the pleasure to receive the other day, which apart from scaring me half to death, accomplished your aim of convincing me at least something of what you said was true.’

For a moment she was silent, concentrating intently on the table, before looking up at him again.

‘Your letter. It sings of a fiction, but it fetishises details of my body, and my life. These are difficult things to reconcile. I know that in place of memory, there is a scar on my mind for several months of 1988. In one sense, anything I learn of it since is a revelation I’m inclined to believe. I wondered about that lost time. I believed I must have many kind strangers to thank for keeping alive throughout it.

‘Ah, Devil. Don’t you know I’ve worked hard for this quiet life?’

She nods, then, as if to herself, in a way he remembers, her eyes glancing up past him toward the ceiling. Shrugging, she taps her cigarette against her saucer and looks back at him.

‘You are right to assume you are strange to me. Remembering who I am cost me the memory of the months I was lost. I’m sure you’ve done your reading. My condition is more common in film, and instances of medical fraud, than in reality. Fugues are a kind of flight. It is commonly speculated that, in the face of unbearable pressure, the mind of a fuguer opens itself to a void. Cases of the condition increase during times of war and other forms of mass unrest. A fugue state permits a kind of internal emigration, a self-imposed exile from the home of the self. Why did I wish to flee? Even your imagination cannot presume to know. I myself can’t be sure. But perhaps you would like to hear my speculations.’

Slowly, she draws herself upright in her chair, and stubs out the cigarette.

‘You have told me of Peter and Klara. I will tell you of Vera. When you have heard her story, perhaps we can have an equal conversation.’ Resting her cheek on her hand again, her eyes fixed at a vague point between Peter and the hall, Vera begins to speak in a low voice, as the late light outside, arcing across the room from the window behind her, lights one side of her yellow hair and leaves the rest in shadow.

‘It happened not far from here. It was spring. I was thirty-four, and home for Easter…’
The sky was blue, the day I came home. My mother’s roses had opened. The little chicks were hatching. The air was alive, everything was crying ‘life’—the wild geese, the blue jays, the piglets and lambs. It was harvest time. Apples and cherries were on the trees, the new potatoes were in the ground. Everyone was ready with their buckets and trowels. Sergei next door had been busy with his queen bee. His famous honey was nearly ready. I always took the train home that time of year. My lungs were impatient for the clear air.

I can see my mother in her good shoes, waiting for me at the station. I can see the wide green boulevards, filled with the sounds of a hundred afternoon homecomings. I can see our white house with the blue shutters. In the kitchen, my mother’s Easter bread is rising on the sill, the daffodils I brought are on the table. My father and brother are waiting at the fence. There are many hugs. There is much to speak of. That night my brother Ivan and I sat up late painting eggs, and after going to bed I couldn’t sleep. Winter had felt like forever; spring had given me a fast heart. The window above my bed was open to the night, and everything smelled new and familiar at once. It was like sediment set adrift by the spring—memories of childhood kept arriving. Hide-and-seek with Ivan in the pine forests, picnics by the Dnieper river, dances at the music hall, my father’s voice telling the dark fairy tales of his German childhood. Sixteen years before that Easter, I’d left home for university in Kiev. To get by, I had worked in a flower shop, and later, as a research assistant in the department where I was finishing my PhD. I didn’t want to meet the fate of so many of my friends, who were housewives. But I didn’t want to work for the State, either. I was in evolutionary biology, then.

Ivan’s twenty-first birthday coincided with the May Day parade the following week, and everyone was already busy with preparations. Coloured balloons had been bought. An amusement park was opening in nearby Pripyat. The district band was going to play. After the parade we were to have a party, with fire displays. Everyone was coming. But the next day was Saturday, and I was glad: a day of quiet and chatter in the kitchen with my mother. We were going to bake a cherry cake.

Saturday morning was bright, but the birds were silent. I pulled out an old sleeveless dress; it was an unusually warm day for spring. After breakfast I wandered around the garden, milked our cow Laika, greeted the chickens and the new chicks. The light was brilliant. It seemed to impart a charge to everything—the leaves, the roses, my body. I said hello to Sergei over the fence—he was raking a potato patch to Verdi on the radio. I passed him a painted egg. I grinned at him and said, ‘When do we get some honey?’ and he paused to lean on the rake, looking toward the hive. ‘Soon, young Vera,’ he said. ‘But I must say the bees are quiet today.’ Everything was quiet. Those bees, along with the worms and the wasps, were about to disappear.
After lunch, when my mother and I were pipping cherries for the cake, Ivan burst in. He had gone out to a party late the previous night, and stayed with his friend Mikhail in town. My mother was annoyed with him. He was meant to have been back for lunch. But before she could say anything, he began to gush.

‘There’s a fire at the plant! We saw it from Mikhail’s window on the fifth floor and went there on our bikes. Everyone was out in their dressing gowns! There was blue smoke! All the firemen came!’ He had the eyes of an evangelist. They had watched the scene from Mikhail’s balcony until the sun was up. The air was hot and smelled strange. Their throats tickled. The entire sky was shining, and apparently it looked magical. My mother sighed and wiped her hands on a teacloth. When Ivan stopped talking, she sat him down in front of a bowl of borscht.

‘You sound mad. Eat this and then get some sleep.’

At dusk, when Ivan was up, we sat under the cherry tree, and I pressed him for gossip about a rumoured girlfriend. He went pink, and said her name was Natalya. They met at the birthday party of a mutual friend. I remember noticing the lines of his face, then. In them I could trace my own, and a little of my mother, and something of my father. I thought, how arbitrary and yet miraculous is the game of genetics, the game of life. I was the unlikely end of so many strange crossings—born finally to this body, this time and place—and unable to imagine any other. We talked there for a while. Except for the sound of the wind through the leaves, there was an unearthly quiet to the air.

It was such a beautiful day, Peter. It is hard to describe the quality of the light, the way the leaves shone. I had the feeling of being blessed, and a little outside of time.

At some point my father came home from his usual Saturday fishing trip with friends, and I suppose Ivan told him about the fire. In the evening I think my mother turned the radio on to see if there was any news, but there wasn’t, and we went on eating dinner. Recently I heard that sixteen weddings took place that day, while at the same time children played outside, men fished in the river and people sunbathed near the cooling vents of the power plant.

On Sunday, I woke early, because when I was home, my mother liked me to accompany her to church in the next town. I remember the walk. The air was filled with that same unreal light. We passed the houses and farms of friends and neighbours, people we had known forever. Children were playing ball on the road. Mothers were pushing prams, balancing shopping bags and toddlers. We waved at our hairdresser Nadya, who had been out to buy bread. In church, the priest spoke of the Resurrection, and we sang an Easter hymn which stayed in my head.

On the way home, we saw government officials heading towards Pripyat in armoured military vehicles. We saw an all-terrain tank in a quiet street. Uniformed men were
hosing down the straw roof of a hut, as the babushka who lived in it stood before them, expressing her confusion with her hands. The shadow had already fallen over us. Like many terrible things, we felt it before we knew what it was. In the space of seconds on Saturday, while the world was sleeping, all that was to happen was set in fatal motion. For us, for all but a few, it was still a known world, still an ordinary Sunday.

In increments over the following hours and days, we began to sense what was already fact. Black government cars and trucks with trailers rolled down the road to Pripyat. Columns of military personnel began to patrol the streets of our own village, washing a strange white powder off the roads. Planes and helicopters flew low. Apparently the trains and trolleys stopped running. The old people began to speak of an American attack, of war, of 1937. Suddenly there were patches of white in our garden, as if the snow had returned. Little black spots appeared on the leaves. The cockscombs of our chickens turned black. Sergei reported finding strange blue minerals by his fence. Our neighbour one street over said her kids found strangled moles in the garden. Laika’s milk wasn’t right. There wasn’t a bird in the sky. I lost my sense of smell. Still, they had told us nothing.

My father was a regional correspondent for a Kiev newspaper called *The Red Star*. He mostly covered local community matters—festivals, feuds, town development, local soccer. He withstood the boredom of it for my mother, as it meant he left for the city less often. On Monday, when a warm dark-coloured rain was falling, he said he was going to investigate. People needed to know what was happening. The same morning, Ivan got ready for the bread factory a few towns over, where he was working to save money in order to move to Moscow. My mother had words with them both at the door. She wanted everyone to stay home until there was an official announcement. Ivan said he didn’t want to lose his job. My father said he didn’t want to wait forever. Secretly, I wanted to go with him, but I stayed inside with my mother instead, and embroidered tea cloths with the radio on. Finally, there was an announcement. It mentioned an accident at the power station, and that there was to be an evacuation that night for the residents of the main town, who needed to pack enough for three days. My mother put a hand to her chest, and said thank God it’s not us.

We knew so little about the atom. We were like children. The puddles that day were green and yellow.

The next evening, Ivan said he and several friends had been called for service in the clean-up. Two men had come to the factory in a black car for him and several of his friends. He tried to calm my mother.

‘It’s just to clean-up’, he said. ‘They’re paying us. I might get a certificate.’

‘But you’ll miss your birthday, and the parade!’ said my mother. Ivan said we could
celebrate when he returned. Another car came for him the next morning, and so we said goodbye for the month he had been told he’d be in service for. I think part of him was actually happy to be called, as if for an adventure.

Ivan had been gone a week before the soldiers came for our town. By then my father had begun to stay out, driving around and interviewing local people and taking photographs until the early hours of the morning, growing blue shadows beneath his eyes. Photography was his hobby, and I sometimes peeked into his shed to see what new apparitions were pegged above the chemicals. I think it was the first time in many years that he had felt a purpose in his work, although I don’t know how much he’d told his editor about his new project. One night I snuck out and walked as far as I could toward evacuated Pripyat. It was like a war-zone. Soldiers and police patrolled the perimeter of the town. I noticed signs in fields and outside houses listing numbers of curie—units of radioactivity. The road smelled of dust. Military vehicles were still leaving and arriving, with trailers full of wheat or equipment or bare earth. All along the road were open graves waiting to swallow trees, dead sheep, military equipment, whole houses. I wondered where Ivan was, and what they had him doing. We all attended the parade in Red Square on May Day. It was tradition. People waved roses, balloons and red flags, soldiers marched, young people danced and sang in nationalistic dress, children sat on the shoulders of their fathers. It was hot. I remember praying for the politicians to finish their speeches so we could go home. Several of the high-profile party men and a few of their children wore raincoats in the sun. We all felt a burning unusual for spring. At home that evening, we ate cake in Ivan’s honour and toasted his twenty-first year.

I began to spend most of my time in my father’s study at the front of the house, in front of the window looking out to the street, which I kept open in order to hear things. I sat in his armchair with my embroidery and watched the changing light, the faces of our neighbours, the procession of cars and soldiers. Sometimes I’d go outside and lean on the fence, or out into the street. When the soldiers began to knock on doors, I heard all kinds of things. ‘Don’t dig up your potatoes,’ they’d say to people in their gardens. ‘Don’t eat your apples, don’t drink that milk’, ‘wear gloves’, ‘don’t go outside’. Half-measures. It all seemed absurd. People laughed, and then they cried. ‘Pack a change of clothes, you have to leave. We need to bury this house.’ Some of the soldiers were just boys like Ivan, their faces poised in child-like surprise at what they had to say. They buried houses and churches, schools and town halls. The old people were so stoic. They fought with the soldiers. ‘I lived through 1937, boys. They took everything. This is my home. Leave me be or shoot me here’; ‘What’s this nonsense? During the war, my own family almost ate me. Where’s the enemy now?’ Those are the things I heard. One old lady told them that they needn’t bother with her. She would take herself to the cemetery before she’d leave.
her home. I was glad my grandparents were dead. Most people packed their bags, frightened for their children. Women would plead with the soldiers to let them take their cats, or their cow, in exchange for gold or vodka. You’d see them crying at the fence. Sergei went into hiding in the forest but they dragged him out. There was no dignity for anyone.

I waited for the knock on our door. When it came one morning, I was there to open it. There was only one soldier, middle-aged. He breathed heavily. He looked bored. He said, ‘You’ve heard of the accident at Chernobyl. We’re now evacuating the wider area for a period to allow for the implementation of safety measures. Pack enough for a few days. The buses leave tonight.’ I must have looked very blank, as he raised his eyebrows at me then. I asked him to tell me how long we would really be away for. If we would ever come back. I knew that the residents of Pripyat had not. I saw his face soften for a moment, before becoming official again. ‘A few days is the current estimate,’ he said. But I had my answer.

I had tried to prepare my mother for this news, but she refused to hear it. My own grief was suspended in fear of hers. She was at the table reading the paper when I entered the kitchen, sitting very stiffly. She took a moment before looking up at me. Her eyes were full of terror, and before I could say anything, we both began to cry.

A little later, we walked to the cemetery. All along the way, in the stillness of the air, in the supernatural golden light—the steady sound of every person’s faith collapsing. But my mother and I kept walking, calm, our eyes on the horizon. We collected earth from my grandparents’ grave in a pickle jar, left eggs and bread on the stone. There were wild roses in the cemetery, so red. And mulberries. Below the mulberry bush was a dead sparrow. When we got home, my mother told me to pick the best of my childhood treasures. I stood, paralysed in the doorway at the sight of our garden in the sun. My mother did not speak. She sat on the steps and weaved a wreath out of ivy for the door. I moved through the rooms of our house, stopping to stare at objects and corners I had not noticed before, unable to think, my body slow as a cow.

My father’s face registered nothing when he came home and heard the news. He walked with purpose to the kitchen and poured us all a vodka. We drank it as the sun went down. Then we began to tread the floors. Back and forth, like insomniacs. Every object I touched recalled a universe to me. We were tracing the geography of our lives. Our arms grew full of things we piled at the door. We hardly spoke. We were apart, as if in water, in a terrible calm. Each choice, each object we took added weight to an extraordinary new reality. What would we take, what would we leave behind, and what difference would it make? We piled clothes, toiletries, and the most necessary of treasures—Starka in her cage, the leather-bound Tolstoy, the photo albums, my
grandmother’s icon of the Virgin, birth records. After a while, I noticed my father standing motionless in the dark outside, smoking cigarette after cigarette. I sat on the steps behind him and wondered what to do with Starka, Laika and the chickens. We wouldn’t be allowed to take even Starka. What if we didn’t return in a few days? I imagined them all starving to death or being eaten by abandoned dogs. I saw Laika, who I’d named after the moon dog, unfed and unmilked, growing thin as her udders grew painful with sour milk. In the kitchen, I drank a fifth of my father’s vodka and waited for my body to ignite. I stood on fire in the garden, waiting for courage that didn’t come. I found the quiet clucking of the chickens and imagined breaking the necks of the adults and the tiny chicks. I found the wind chime sound of Laika’s rusty bell, and saw her turn to look at me in the dark. She had been swishing her tail to ward off the midges bothering her, and was chewing slowly on a mouthful of grass. I was shaking and cold. A friend had given us Laika when she was still a calf. I knew the sweet hay smell of her breath. I wished for a gun, but I had only a knife, and an oar from the canoe we drove to rivers in the summer. I stood there before her as she watched me, chewing and swishing her tail. A few times I found a surge of electricity, which died as I stood, unable to move, unable to decide on which side of her gentle head to aim the blow. But I could barely breathe by then. My throat closed. I was too weak to spare her a more miserable death. The government didn’t think about the animals.

We were ready long before the buses came. Our bags were packed at the door, which was open to the street we had lived our lives on. The windows were open, and had been for days. The idea was so foreign that we considered it with a dimness people like to think unusual of our species, if we thought of it at all: how could air be an enemy? It was invisible as God. We sat at the table, breathing in that air as we had for weeks, just five kilometres shy of the first evacuated zone, drinking tea we shouldn’t have been drinking, now and then getting up for some artefact we had forgotten to pack. It was as if objects suddenly came to exceed their inanimate and often arbitrary nature. As if they bore a weight of memory we couldn’t carry but couldn’t leave behind. Our minds seemed too frail, too wild to remember everything alone; the task seemed to eclipse physical capacity. The angles and shadows of the kitchen became final, the faces of my parents like icons regarding eternity from a place of stillness. Exile is absolute, and on the level at which instinct overtook Soviet complacency, they also knew that exile was our fate.

Before my mother led us out the door, she turned her icon of Christ Pantokrator upside down, left bread and eggs on the table with four spoons for all our souls, and wrote in chalk our names on the door, so that we would return. Eventually we assembled outside
the local school with the rest of our town. Many old people were taken there by force. People brought the most impossible things—half the potato harvest, fur coats, canned herring, a chicken. Some children thought they were going camping. Some people’s eyes were enormous and glazed, as if hiding inside their own bodies. The scenes were terrible. It was like a surrender of souls. I remember the banner above the school door: ‘The accomplishments of people are immortal’.

On those buses we travelled out of our own histories into the early hours of the new day. Leaving some, I knew, hiding like partisans in the forest. Leaving Ivan behind, Ivan and so many others, breathing an atmosphere most immediately fatal for children and the unborn, yet calamitous enough for everyone grown. That atmosphere had already descended in the form of acid rain upon cities as distant as London, and would, even that day, impart a radioactive tan to children in the playgrounds of many towns beyond ours. It would condemn the pine forests of my childhood to burial, the houses to ruin, the mineral-rich soils to radioactivity and the harvests of our ancient plough lands to waste. The memories of generations, unconsciously inscribed in a geography of storybook beauty—the waters in the Dneiper river from which for three days people yet drew fish, the udders of the treasured cow every second person owned, the ripe red apples on the trees which by the first fatal afternoon were marred by black spots and their leaves by holes, the unassuming treetop homes of newborn birds, the germinating lives in every living womb, the family cats and dogs too numerous and too insignificant to be saved in life or death by shotgun, the bedrock of an agrarian history ancient and latent in the very land—to all these was allotted the outrage of a rape so absolute it was sublime. It was sublime, and even as we left it was beautiful. The beauty made it harder to believe. A little known effect of a newly radioactive atmosphere is the rapid blooming of flowers, and the heightened luminosity of plant pigments.

Our faith was primitive, it led us astray. Faith and fatalism run together in the Russian mind. We are too romantic; our fervour has always found expression. We believed in the atom as we had believed in the railroad, in Byzantium, in Rasputin and the Romanovs. A fatal vein in everything.

Our home became The Zone. It’s something out of Gogol; it’s science-fiction. Months later, Ivan told me of something he saw while on patrol that I couldn’t forget—an old farmer in her field milking her cow, each of them wrapped in cellophane. Cellophane to protect them from radiation. That was in hospital before he died. He shovelled graphite off the reactor roof with his bare hands in a handmade lead suit.

*
Dusk comes suddenly, or so it seems to Peter and Vera, when she stops speaking and they again notice the day. Out the window, the light of the low sun reddens the trees. As if in response, their voices also drop, before words themselves dissipate in the gloom between them. The sound of Vera’s sudden breath rouses Peter from his daze, as she stands to switch on another lamp. Yellow light pools in the corner behind her chair. Seated again, she breathes steadily, inspecting her hands. It seems she has said all she intends to say. Leaning forward, Peter places his elbows on the table, presses his hands in a steeple beneath his chin, and looks at her, unconsciously affecting the aspect of a priest.

‘You have survived a tragedy. I’m sorry. But I’m glad you told me.’

Vera nods and for a moment scratches her head. Their physical configuration at the table is now reversed, as Vera leans back, and Peter sits forward, rigid and tense. Neither speaks for some minutes. Eventually, Peter straightens in his chair, eyes fixed on Vera until she glances past him toward the hall, and says in a low and level voice, ‘Vera you are unwell.’

The next second, he sees her eyes widen, while in every other way her face remains impassive. She brings a hand to her throat to touch the faint curved scar there, as is her habit. He hears her swallow as she looks at the table. When she looks at him, a frown forms between her eyes.

‘What are you talking about,’ she says, without the inflection of a question. That instant, Peter’s heart heaves; certainty closes its circle in his mind. The thought charges every part of his body: All I have sensed is true.

* 

There is a challenge in the gaze of each upon the other now, although of what kind exactly neither is sure. Peter for a moment feels himself cast out on the tide of Vera’s eyes, and, before the radiant blur of her warm being before him—so impossible and so real—fights the urge to take her by the shoulders, to possess her. Vera, in her efforts to fathom Peter, finds him incomparable; like an albino owl, an unlikely strain of his own species, and feels herself losing the resolve she had counted on for this meeting. She has the longing to surrender all to this stranger who is more than simply strange—to his quiet conviction, a force which
seems to extend beyond his body—to his stony presence before which it seems
nothing is lost. At the table, she straightens in her chair and draws a breath.
‘How did you come to make such assumptions about my health?’
Finally, without taking his eyes from her, Peter speaks the words which are
already on his tongue.
‘I knew.’
She looks at him for a long while. She raises her fingers to her mouth in
thought, and looks away with a tired smile that passes.
‘That is not enough. Besides, it can hardly be true.’
‘I understand your doubt, Vera.’
‘Why make so much of a chance meeting, Peter? I was just a woman with
amnesia and an empty purse. You were as kind to me as you seem to have been
cruel. Why the effort to find me?’
‘Because our meeting was no act of chance. I understand how the word fate
sounds to a scientist, but there is no other. Before I saw you I had dreamed of your
face.’

* 

Vera has no more words for Peter that day. She looks up at him when he shifts in
his chair and begins to adjust his jacket, making to go. She remains in her chair as
he stands. When she speaks, she regards him from a slight angle, her tilted chin
suggesting a defiance he wonders at, and her eyes searching his face as if to
discern something that might not be immediately apparent.
‘Be here tomorrow at the same time. I have something to show you.’
He holds her gaze for a moment, and nods, before turning for the hall. She
rises from her chair to follow, and leans against the flaking doorframe as he faces
her on the step.
‘Tomorrow,’ he says. Before he turns she raises her hand. He believes she is
trying not to smile.

*
The next day, the door opens before his hand touches the buzzer. She stands in the doorway, pink-cheeked and unmoving, her damp hair falling from a blue scarf. Involuntarily, his eyes close for a moment. He can smell the flowers in her shampoo.

‘I saw you from the window,’ she says, standing aside for him to enter. The bodice of her shirt rises and falls with her quick breath. He looks down at his shoes, and notices for the first time that large clods of earth from outside have stuck to the soles. He smiles up at her in apology, and returns to the doormat where he scrapes them clean, before once more stepping inside, feeling too wild and too large for her hall. She walks slowly in front of him, hesitating before the sitting room off the kitchen. After a moment, she moves aside, and looks up at him with an expression he has not seen before, an expression neither of despair nor of hope, yet closer to each than other words he can think of.

He steps forward, and, in the fall of light, for a moment doesn’t see what it is he has come to be shown: a small boy, sitting at the table, kicking his leg and holding a glass of the milk which dribbles down his chin. He is quite oblivious of the adults watching him until Vera moves over to touch his shoulder.

‘Ivan. There is a man here to meet you.’

Kneeling on the floor behind the boy, she uses her sleeve to wipe his chin, before leaning an elbow on the edge of the table and finally looking up at Peter, who hasn’t moved. For that moment it is as if the sun shines on them alone. Peter runs a hand over his mouth. He takes a breath, and moves toward the opposite chair to sit down. He looks at Vera. He looks at the boy. Vera’s eyes have grown enormous.

‘Hello,’ says the boy, looking at Peter.

‘Hello, Ivan’ says Peter, offering a smile.

Moments later, in the hallway, he faces Vera.

‘You don’t need to tell me,’ he says in a low voice, looking not at Vera but at the boy. He is looking at his shoes, as though deep in thought. Absently, Vera walks over to stroke his head, and sits down at the table as the boy opens a picture book. She is looking at her hands on the table when Peter looks at her. They sit together for a while, speaking politely. The boy is shy. When he goes to the bathroom, Peter asks Vera:

‘Have you managed alright?’
She nods, returning his gaze with a smile.

‘You didn’t need the mask to prove your story. I knew as soon as I saw you.’
‘Yes. We have the same eyes. I only hope he has your character.’

* *

They do not speak for a long time after that. Vera eventually leaves the table to prepare a supper of soup on the stove, and Peter remains seated at the table, looking out at the darkening window and at the boy with his father’s eyes and his mother’s mouth, listening to the regular sound of Vera’s breathing nearby. When they have eaten, Peter thanks Vera in a formal tone, rises to his feet, and quietly asks if he might have a photograph of the boy. After disappearing into another room, she returns to press an envelope into his hands. Peter smiles, for a moment unable to look at her face. Looking down, he sees she is wearing red shoes with old-fashioned laces. Peter wonders why it is that these shoes seem so particular to Vera, and then, looking up, notices that she is gazing at him with a furious consternation, softened by the features of her face. He can see her, that instant, as a child. Swiftly, Peter kneels before the boy to voice a solemn goodbye. Vera turns then, walks down the hall, and stops before reaching the front door. When Peter reaches her, he sees they are at the entrance to a bedroom. It is sparse, with a neat single bed. Leaning now against the doorframe, one red shoe over the other, Vera looks at him openly, as if calculating the meaning of his features. He thinks for a moment that she is on the verge of issuing him some kind of dare. Instead, she lets the moment pass, glancing down and then touching his arm with a consolatory smile.

‘You can come for tea on Saturday, same time.’

At that, she turns and walks back down the hall, leaving Peter by the door. Still standing there, he hears her clearing the plates from the table. Before leaving, he steps for a moment into the spare room. It smells of plaster and clean linen. He walks over to the window and pulls back the curtain. With some force, he eases open the pane, and stands there a moment, feeling the cool night on his skin. It is dark now, but the air is sweet.

*
He recalls how it had happened, the morning after the mask, the day she left him in the shadows of Vesuvius. He had dreamed strange, tropical dreams in the night, and awoke with a world of colours fading beneath his eyelids. In comparison, the room was dim. He listened to the heavy breath of Klara asleep, the sound of the laneway shops opening for the day, and to those church bells far away, until something savage in his breast told him the mask was not enough. If he did not put his scruples aside long enough to see if she would have him, he would live with the regret forever. He had watched over her from a bedside chair until her eyes opened. What dreams had she been living? Was this the day she would remember her name? These questions occurred to him every morning. During the long moment in which they looked at each other without blinking, it occurred to Peter that Klara knew all he was thinking. He stood just as the distant bells tolled the hour, walking over until his face leaned over hers directly. After another moment in which their eyes did not part, his hand reached down to touch her hair, his other hand found her breast, and Klara did not ask him to take it away.

He remembered wondering at the time whether making love, for a woman with amnesia, was like making love for the first time. He would never know truly where memory ended and the innocent unknowing of childhood began in Klara.

That morning was, he supposed, just another passage in the long hall of those weeks that now lived for him alone.

It happened only once.

He can still hear her cries.

* 

The day that Peter had first stood before Vera in her doorway, a cold wave took his body. It came as if from far away, and took his breath when it broke. Looking into her face, he knew in an instant she was not well. A fatal radiance emanated from deep beneath her skin. The truth of it struck his heart like a chord. The Klara he had found was dying, and he wondered if she knew it yet.
And so Peter remains in his pink room at Parkview through the winter. He visits Vera that Saturday, and then every Saturday thereafter.

‘Next Saturday I won’t be here at two, but at three, I will’, she says the next time they meet, farewelling Peter at the door. Perfunctory but deliberate, with clear, cold eyes. With a dart of joy, Peter understands the invitation, but wonders at her reasons. What is it she sees in him, this man who has taken such liberties? Does she merely see the father of her child? What does she hope to gain from yielding, albeit rather stiffly, to his longing to see her? He knows she is lonely. He knows that she guards her private life closely. Perhaps he had stepped through the hardest wall when he professed to already know so much.

On these Saturdays they drink tea or coffee, eating sandwiches or a type of strudel Vera likes to make. Slowly they grow more at ease together, although always a certain edge remains between them. Slowly they begin to talk of other things. Ivan is never there.

Peter comes to an arrangement with the manager of the hotel for a long-term weekly rate, including breakfast in the forlorn basement dining room with its pot plants and lonely lorikeet. It is the only meal they serve there, and so Peter always makes a feast of the cornflakes and sugary yoghurt, stale rolls and cold cuts. There are hardly any other guests, a good thing. It is not a holiday town. He has outstayed the fat businessman with his noisy fussing wife and children; he will outstay the pale professional couple who eat toast at seven and seem not to speak often. When alone, he stays reading the paper until the coffee in the urn is too cool to drink, talking to the lorikeet. He is sick of eating out in town; sick of walking its artless streets. Peter is living for Saturdays.

*

Over the Saturdays, an understanding which is unsaid grows between them, the delicate tightening of a shared thread neither really understands. It is as if some residue of a past only one of them remembers is beginning to bind, beginning to find the careful threshold of a future. It is hard to put words to these things, and that which hesitates to be born in syllables and vowels is eel-slippery, unbidden and unanswerable, coming in a dart, and receding in a shadow, before we wonder whether it was ever real at all.
As hard as it is at times for Peter, they keep to simple things. They let the rest settle in the silences and looks they share, each wondering whether it signifies to the other what it does to them. Such are the quiet questions which animate the most thrilling of exchanges.

Sometimes Vera saves interesting articles from the paper to discuss with him. One afternoon Peter helps her plant her internal window boxes with seeds for early spring, on another when he finds her mixing up a cake batter, she ceremoniously suggests he pours it into the tin, and he is, on each occasion, so childishly delighted that he colours. When he enters Vera’s rooms he enters a particular order. Often they do not speak.

* 

One Saturday, while Vera is rinsing the dishes from a cake just placed in the oven, and Peter is leaning back at the kitchen table vaguely watching her, she says, ‘You know, don’t you?’ Her voice is quiet and certain. She turns to face him, then, with eyes of glass. Her face is impassive. She leans a little against the sink, gloved hands at her sides. Two pools of soapy water collect on the lino.

Peter says nothing, his eyes unshifting upon her. Vera pulls off a glove and sighs.

‘How on earth do you know.’

This is not a question. She turns from him to grip the sink. His opening has arrived. Blood thuds in his ears, his heart lurches for a moment as he propels himself to speak words which will be irreversible, and likely premature. But they do not have the luxury of time, and he is desperate to stop their tip-toe talk which is growing dry. He wants it out, in light, between them: the viscera, the guts, the primitive urges, the truth for so long unspoken. Knowing it is too early but bursting with the urge to be brazen, Peter speaks now, in a cold, low voice she will not mistake.

‘Come home with me, Vera.’

Peter had expected wide eyes, a frown, even a hoot of disdain. Above all he expected surprise. But Vera is not surprised. Carefully, she peels off the other glove and drops them in the sink. Is this enough to infer that she in fact registers, beyond what shows, the perpetual current between them? She doesn’t blink; her
eyes upon him are unchanged. She only stands there against the sink, a little limp, and shoves her hands, warm from the water and pink, into the front pockets of her antiquated apron. For a moment she looks at her red shoes.

‘You are a unique man, Peter,’ she says, before, slowly, she shakes her head. Peter, louder now, digs in.

‘Come home with me to Australia. We’ll take Ivan. I’ll look after you.’

‘No,’ she says, quiet and looking now to some mystery beyond his left shoulder. ‘I know where I am going, and it is not to your home.’

Peter knows better than to question this new assertion in the air between them. Saying it, Vera’s voice is without doubt, detached. It is as if she believes her end belongs only in this place, and in going there she is simply abiding a natural law. Peter is quiet for the rest of that visit, but his hope doesn’t die.

*

After that day, Peter begins visiting occasionally on Sundays or in the weekday evenings a little after Vera arrives home from work. He stands with a bottle of wine, a loaf of rye, a block of chocolate, holding his offering like a libation to some fickle god in her doorway until she answers his knock, in her work skirt and bare feet, or in leggings and a flannel shirt she drowns in, which is awful and also somehow touching. Before him in the doorway she pauses, placid and concerned, always long enough for Peter’s doubt that she will let him in to flood him with cold heat. And then she stands aside for him to enter.

In this way, Peter keeps coming, unbidden, on days and nights not Saturday, and Vera keeps letting him in. As the days grow warmer, she begins to expect him. Such is the frequency, now, of his knock on her door. Peter notices what Vera never draws attention to— that before he comes she is already preparing dinner for two; that she has a story from her week ready to tell; a new window flower to show him; a question about Australia. It is quiet and unsmiling, this way she allows a place for him. It is not light or lightly given. She never surrenders all her trust. He sees that even in her face. Perhaps because she is, by nature or from the course of life, so grave, the occasions when she laughs or smiles become Peter’s singular delight; to increase them, his challenge.

He wonders about how to test a territory whose borders must be touched, in
order to be known. There is danger in such expeditions, precious land to be lost. But Vera will not be the one to test it, this he knows.

*

Already by spring, every evening, when Vera is back from work and he from a day of roaming, and dinner is eaten and the last light of dusk fading outside, Peter voices the same words; ‘Come home with me.’ To which she only says ‘No.’ Asked where it is she will go instead, she only ever shakes her head. After a while, Vera stops responding altogether, although Peter, like the Beast in the tale, does not stop asking. He feels he is being tested, and wonders how long her patience will last.

Vera is as intrigued by Peter’s work as he is by hers, although it is not easy to get her to talk about it. Peter, for his part, is pleased to answer her questions, which grow more specific each time. ‘Do you do statues?’ she says suddenly one day, a glint of mirth in her eye. ‘What’s the most broken thing you’ve ever put back together?’ ‘How many pieces did it consist of?’ ‘Did you use ordinary glue?’ ‘How do you remove lime scale off an old statue?’ ‘If you had been the one to clean the salt and barnacles off the Marine Venus when she was brought back to earth, how would you have done it?’

It is a game she plays. She is always more animated when the subject is not herself.

*

It is now late spring. Vera has a week off work. One night, over dinner, which they have, on these balmy evenings, on the tiny concrete balcony overlooking the park, she tells Peter that she wants to take him on a drive. Peter is delighted. They will escape this town, in which he is languishing for Vera alone. He will know her in another setting. She may wear her hair down. It will be a beautiful day. A day he determines to always remember, should it never happen again; a cameo set with her face.

She is taking him to her family’s dacha, not far from here, by a river. Ivan will be there, and her mother. It is a place her father loved, where he would fish and
read the books he didn’t have time for in town. It is alive with memories Vera does not always have the strength for. The day before, Peter comes to help her in the kitchen. He hands her ingredients, rinses bowls, keeps an eye on the oven. He watches her. She does not use recipes. She kneads the bread with expert hands. She fries the potato pancakes without a single spare movement. She folds the batter for the almond cake with tender attention. There in the wonderful-smelling kitchen with Vera at peace in her labours, accepting his culinary ministrations and taking his presence for granted, Peter thinks of how it is at a moment like this that he would like to die.

With a boot-load of food, they drive for an hour to get there. It is interesting to watch Vera drive. He had expected her to be a nervous driver, but she is calm. She handles the wheel lightly. Now and then she looks over and indulges him with a smile. He asks about the towns they pass. She tells him their names. She mentions what the town is known for; excellent sunflowers or good butter; a notable healer; an unsolved murder; a kulak massacre. In one town she speaks of having a school friend she sees no longer, in another a cousin with dementia. History is an element of the atmosphere, here. Personal and eternal, it is a kind of humidity, still, in the air.

Finally, she speaks to him. He coaxes nothing. He is careful to retain a mild countenance beside her, lest the revelations stop. Today, whether she knows it or not, and if only for today, the weather has declared it time for Vera to open a little, under the sun. She quiets before they reach the place. He feels her gathering in. He wonders about meeting her mother, seeing the boy he still cannot think of as Son, as he has never imagined being Father, and indeed, has not been. This son who is called Ivan, who he does not know and to whom he is unknown, who is half of her and half of him, the bodily union of a love she never owned. It is his love, his love alone. Ivan is the lacuna between them, the missing text, the lexical gap, the extended silence. Lacuna of the son; of the years; of her memory. Lacuna of her love.

* 

Vera’s mother is small, stolid in a graceful way, round-faced and rosy, with dyed russet hair in an unruly bob. She wears a loose-fitting multi-coloured dress, a
bright green apron and house shoes. Her eyes are bright and sharp. This is Nina. She has Vera’s inward strength and gentleness, without the stiffness and the threat of closing in— that shell-dwelling creature’s retreat which Peter fears. Warmer than her daughter, more open, more trusting, she has the same thoughtful quiet. She has the same hesitation to laugh, as though such things come at a cost. When Nina and Vera do laugh, there is a tiny frown that follows, as if in self-rebuke at such forgetting, such indulgence. It is a frugality neither could have been born with.

Peter cannot guess how much Vera’s mother knows, although she seems pleased to meet him. At the sound of the car she rushes out, tea towel in hand, waving. She embraces her daughter, effusive, light-hearted, an ironic humour in her eyes as they exchange kisses and words. Peter, shy, waits by the car. With a small hoot, seeing him there while still holding Vera’s shoulders, she bustles around to embrace him too, clucking with exclamations of greeting.

‘Ah, and you are Peter! From Siberia first and now from Australia! What a travelled man. We are so pleased to have you.’

She has taken him by the arm, guiding him up the path to the door of the dacha, the traditional Slavic country shack, as Vera, carrying the baskets of food, trails behind. Inside, Peter presents Nina with a bottle of her favourite vodka. She is theatrically touched, marvelling with delight at the vodka as if it were myrrh. They talk a little as Vera sets everything down. She tells him this dacha has been in the family a long time.

‘Many memories,’ she says, nodding, cheerful and then wincing a little. Peter sees her resisting, the little dart driving in. She smiles and smacks her knees. A hearty woman, he thinks. A woman of the earth, not so complicated as her daughter. In her mother’s countenance, none of Vera’s distance. Although Vera had a good dose of earth in her, too. This combination in Vera is as ravishing as it is confounding. He will always be guessing. If she ever has, she will never now yield her whole self, not to life, and not to him, perhaps not even to herself alone. She is a deep lake, his Vera. Somewhere within her, he is sure, resides a magnitude which would astound them all. It is this, thinks Peter, regarding her in her mother’s kitchen, oblivious of him, levering the cake out of its tin with a look of childlike consternation. This beyond all else, this quiet, submerged weight borne so deeply, so unassumingly in her voice and face and body. A gravity which
reflects the mind and heart within. Like most sublime phenomena, there is danger in it, and redemption. To be near her is to be alive with the hope of revelation. It is for this, above all else, that he loves her.

* 

Together they walk through the main room and out the back door, where a table and chairs are laid beneath a cherry tree roped with a homemade swing. On the swing sits Ivan, propelling himself forward with his right foot now and then, looking out at the adults with a blithe, wizened little face, the face of his mother.

He has to be induced to hug Vera. It seems painful to him. She pretends not to notice. At the table, he looks at her all the time, his face bathed with a vital light. Regrettable, thinks Peter, that his introduction to yearning had come so young, through his own mother, who was nearby and alive. Peter wonders why this is the order of things. It seems that Vera sees Ivan only on Sundays, an unnatural situation for which there must be a reason.

Around the table they eat and talk slowly, enjoying the sunlight which, through the tree, throws patterns on the table which waver like reflections on water. They hypnotise Ivan. Peter watches him. Ivan looks at things with a reverent kind of patience rare in a child. His eyes drink things in and calculate. He appears to have a visual sensibility. Watching this child, this stranger of his own blood, Peter wonders what he is supposed to feel.

Vera treats him carefully, like a foreign but devoted aunt. She winks gently, passing him a plate of bread. It is hard to watch the effect a smile from her has on that five-year old face: joy, unmediated, religious. After the main course, the women go inside—Vera to cut the almond cake, Nina to brew the coffee. For a moment, Peter and Ivan sit alone. Ivan gazes around the garden, biting his lip, his eyes returning to the open door. Peter watches him until he looks back, and sees his own eyes.

‘Do you want to know a secret?’ he says.

Ivan’s eyes are wide. He doesn’t know what to say.

‘We have something in common, you and me. We live beneath the same throne. The queen is inside cutting cake.’

Ivan looks at Peter as if he had been speaking Latin. Peter straightens in his
chair and smiles.

‘I have brought you a gift,’ he says, holding out a rectangular box with a ribbon. Ivan takes it after a moment, saying thank you in a quiet voice.

‘It’s a kaleidoscope. It makes art out of everything.’

Peter helps Ivan place it to his eye the right way. Ivan looks through it at the chestnut tree, and then, smiling, at Peter. They both begin to laugh.

‘You see?’ says Peter, now taking it to his own eye to look at Ivan. ‘Don’t we look different!’

‘Very different!’ says Ivan. Peter pats him on the back and gives him back the kaleidoscope.

‘This is a pretty place, Ivan. Does your grandmother take you here often?’

‘Not really,’ says Ivan in a soft voice, shifting in his chair to face Peter better. He seems relieved. ‘We usually come in Easter and in summer.’

_Polite; well-spoken for his age._

‘Do you ever swim in the river?’

‘Sometimes,’ says Ivan, suddenly plonking his elbow on the table to rest his cheek on one fist, the pose of the thinker. Such a gesture in a five year old might look affected if it were not so genuine to his countenance. _An interesting little specimen._

* 

Mother and daughter return, coffee and cake are served. The four maintain a light chatter guided by Nina. Vera grows more relaxed and more lively. She teases everyone charmingly. She pushes Ivan on the swing. Ivan seems happy. Peter speaks of his history, and of his work; he gives them a fine oration. At times he appeals to Ivan’s attention. ‘I was born in a land of shamans and snow, of ancient woods, reindeer and Eskimos…’

He asks Nina many polite questions: ‘What was your family’s main crop?%; ‘Did your town suffer the purges?’; ‘Did you manage to keep your horses?’

‘What was Vera like as a child?’

The more he asks, the more she tells. She is in the mood for reminiscing.

‘Oh Vera, she was a little doll to her father and the neighbours. I was the one who witnessed her rages and her tears of sorrow. A very red heart she has, my
Vera…’

His vision of Vera’s beginnings gains focus. The day goes on, languorous and long, in the garden until it grows chill. They stand for a while on the riverbank, watching the sun go down, until it is time for goodbyes and home.

*

Vera will die first.

This is the fact. Its truth and its necessity, which Peter neither predicted nor chose, dawns upon him one day in the contemplation of his own death. To bury Vera, he must survive her. He must survive her in order to lay her down.

The days grow warmer. As if she were a plant unsuited to such temperate conditions, it begins. Vera’s illness, at indiscernible speed, impregnates her outer skin. Blue shadows beneath her eyes. Her delicate skull foregrounded in her face. Her hair losing its lustre, her cheeks their colour. She is beautiful as ever to Peter, only farther from the earth.

*

A month after the day at the dacha, let’s call it a week night, Peter arrives at the customary time for supper. Vera takes longer than usual to answer. The rims of her eyes are red. Her work clothes look dishevelled. She says hello in a thick voice and turns back down the hall, not waiting for him to follow. In the kitchen she is pouring tea, a cup for him, a cup for her. With their cups in hand they face each other. He asks her what has happened. She shakes her head and sniffs a little. She mumbles about a bad day. Doesn’t want to talk about it. They drink their tea. They look out the window. *Tell me Vera,* says Peter. *What on earth has happened.* Vera sighs, traces a finger along the edge of the table.

She was very weak today. At work in the lab she fainted. Her doctor had words with her. From home she phoned her boss. She is no longer fit to fulfil her duties. From today, she will cease all formal work activities at the Institute. Everyone agrees. It is what must be. Vera must stay at home and rest.

She holds her head in her hands.

‘It’s too soon. The days of nothing will swallow me. I’ll have nowhere to
hide. How will I look away?’

For a moment Peter has the vision of Vera becoming a statue before him, slowly remade in stone. He aches to help her, but he has never been enough. Trying to keep the pleading from his voice, he tells her of the other things she might do. The things they might, if she likes, do together. With this time, they could drive everywhere, they could visit galleries, he could teach her to paint, she could teach him to bake, they could take a scenic tour of the Carpathian mountains. He could outline for her the fundamental tenets of Egyptian religion.

She sits still as he speaks, at once hard and tremulous. Never before has he been so near to her real feeling, to her bare and brilliant soul. A light-giving stone, he thinks, a lunar body, her own moon. In his thoughts then, her voice. *Hold me, please.*

Has he heard right? Yes. She is looking at him from across the table, on her face, an expression which is terrible. Terrible, in the old sense of that word. The features of her face look like they might break. Across to her, as if through water, he travels, a mile which is a metre or so. At her feet, at her red shoes he brings his knees, and with arms more alive than ever in life, embraces her rigid shoulders, buries his face in her neck. Blood rushes to his head. His heart is in his ears. His body is a drum. With all his cells, he imagines imparting strength to her, from his body to her own. He holds her for a long time. Refusing to issue her with platitudes, he has few words for her. All he can say is contained within their embrace.

The embrace creates between them a visceral channel, through which a deeper energy now flows. In his feelings now, somehow and without real reason, Peter feels less alone.

* 

He begins to visit Vera every day, sometimes early, sometimes late, bringing the daily paper, and, now and then, a bunch of tulips, as Vera has politely suggested that her waistline needs a break from the sweet pastries he likes to bring her (the bakery ladies now expect him). Sometimes they take a walk around town, drink coffee, sit in the park with a section of the paper on their separate laps and mutter about events which seem far away. There is a growing restlessness in Vera. She is
frightened, she is bored. Yet she never wants to venture farther than the town. The
city is too loud. She is not strong enough for the mountains. Alright, she says
when Peter suggests they paint. While they paint, they talk.

One night in Vera’s lounge when it is late, and they have each been reading,
Peter falls asleep in his chair beneath the newspaper. He wakes when Vera
removes the newspaper and touches his shoulder. You can stay here, if you like,
she says, with a hesitant gesture of the thumb toward the spare room behind them.

In the morning at the kitchen table as they drink coffee, watching each other’s
pale morning faces, she tells him that he doesn’t have to go, as if she is not certain
that at her word he would stay forever.

* 

On that quiet day, Peter checks out of his hotel, his heart racing so fast he fears for
his health. Vera left after lunch to visit Ivan and her mother, and will not be home
until evening, and so Peter takes the train to Kiev for the afternoon. The train is
quaint, with leather seats and window curtains and smart conductors. At a village
called Vorodsky a red-cheeked man in an old-fashioned suit boards and sits
opposite him. They speak a few words about the weather, about Siberia, and share
a few capfuls of the man’s vodka. Peter enjoys the journey.

In Kiev, having farewelled the suited stranger, Peter finds his way to the
nearest square. He knows what he needs, but not where to find it. He will not be
able to get everything. He will have to make do with what he can carry. Without
his Russian, he wouldn’t like his chances of procuring anything at all in that busy
city. By appealing to a succession of shopkeepers and pedestrians, he finds a craft
shop within an hour. When he walks in, the owl-like woman at the counter seems
suspicious, reluctant to leave her accounts to help him. He peruses the shelves
alone, aware of being watched. He asks the woman if she has any gold leaf. She
does not, and seems satisfied by this fact. Sighing, Peter buys ten jumbo rolls of
plaster bandage, a kilo of terracotta, turpentine, the entire range of the most
expensive acrylic paints, and a case of brushes and modelling tools. Softened,
perhaps, by the sum of money he has just spent, the woman relents when he asks
whether there is a haberdashery or hardware store nearby. Both, she says, on the
opposite side of the next street over.
At the haberdashery, he buys a ream of raw linen; at the hardware store, a toolbox and a collection of bolts, rivets and nails. All guesswork; certainly there are things he has forgotten. He buys a suitcase. Reaching the station is not easy. He thinks all the way back to town, looking out the window at a shifting landscape once familiar. How is he to present at Vera’s with this odd hoard? He will let her assume that half of it all is for their ventures in painting. He will be vague about the details.

* 

The apartment is now too small a world.

Vera sits in the park re-reading the copy of Anna Karenina, full of her father’s student notes. She bakes bread for her favourite neighbours, teaches Peter how to know when kneaded milk dough is elastic but not yet tough. She lies in bed for long afternoons in the blue shadows of her room, feeling the coming autumn in the air through the window above her head. She cannot accustom herself to this rest. Where before it had been the unreal shadow of a nightfall far away, lying now in her bed, Vera thinks only of death. She longs only for the forest, for its confounding stillness and its shade. This rest rehearses death. To stay this way in a grey town which is no-one’s true home, which is a raft of sorrow, is to wind herself in a sheet now, ready for the ground with a beating heart. She wants the company of barn owls and voles. She wants to picnic on the ground of home, waiting for the wild boars, for the elk to come, leading on their growing young. She wants to watch the Przewalski’s horses, allowed a life there on that lost land and possibly evolving differently for it, their impossible beauty yet undiminished, imagining all of this as it is now, going on tomorrow, when she will be gone. If death is to come for her at forty, it will come on the ground that bore it. At a moment she hopes will keep its shadow close, to catch her unawares in sleep or thought, near the cool and beating forest she knows so well, it will come.

* 

Vera says goodbye to her friends and neighbours, and speaks to her doctor. She packs crackers, cans of pickles, beans and fish, dry goods, evaporated milk, still
water, gas cans and a camp stove. To these she adds an album of photographs, a stack of music tapes, a Russian translation of Whitman, and her medicine.

*Where are you going?* asks Peter, observing her from a chair in the lounge, and she says what he has known she will say: *Home.*

An unspoken understanding has grown between them.

Peter is quiet while she is packing. For hours she paces around, lifting things, caressing them, returning them to their places or dropping them in boxes she carries outside to the car until the boot will barely close. The car swallows half the larder, the thickest bedding, whole shelves of books. Vera stops when there is no room left. The entire backseat is full. She does not look at Peter. She does not speak. It is time.

*I see her, a last suitcase in hand, edging out the door, looking proud. Finally, Peter steps forth from the shadows of the morning, catching the door before it closes behind her, gently wresting the suitcase from her hand. His heart barely beating, his own bags on his shoulder. They are silent as she locks the door. He follows her to the car outside, stands as she shuffles things around. Finally, she turns, as if to grant him a cursory parting glance. She takes in his stance before her, his grave face and his bag. He sees her taking a breath. She is biting her lip. Her face has a look of impassive deliberation, her eyes roving a little, her mouth unsure. Finally, and with a perfunctory, routine air, she reaches swiftly for his bag, hurls it onto the back seat, and opens the passenger door, revealing the seat left bare. She walks around to the driver’s door, business-like, as if going to work, gets in and starts the ignition. Before they drive off she looks at him with a naked face, a strange light in her eyes, as if humbled by a gift, and, looking away, in a small voice says, ‘It’s not far.’*

*At the border, the guards nod at Vera’s familiar face and wave her through, blind to the car’s heavy cargo. They enter the forbidden road, edged with summer’s green leaves, and Peter unfurls from the floor where he had crouched beneath a*
coat. Vera gazes ahead, her grip tight on the wheel. They are to find her childhood home, where, with the instinct that calls a wounded elk to drag itself into the shelter of a cave, she is to die.

She tells him she has avoided the house all the years of her work there. She does not know in what condition they will find it, if it still stands at all. It is on a side street of one of the Zone villages, a street of farm lots, fallen fences and the ruins of chimneys and rooves. They drive slowly, for the road is cracked and littered with fallen branches. Vera stops midway, and leans against the car door facing the street’s right side. The remains of a gate lie before her, a three-walled house with a blue door beyond. Like playing cards, the roof and remaining walls of the house seem to balance each other at odd angles. The shed behind the house is in better condition, having retained all its walls. Vera, her breathing uneven, backs away, returns to her seat. For several minutes they crawl the surrounding streets in silence, Peter keeping his eyes on his own window, as Vera, with cold ferocity, scans every standing house in every street. He knows they must find a place. She cannot return to town.

The house Vera stops at is on a corner. The street is full of trees. The house is of stone, set back from the road behind a yard of tall grass and apple trees. With a groan, the door gives. Debris strews the floor—yellowed papers, old bottles, mouse droppings and bird feathers. It smells of mould and urine. Like everywhere, it has been scoured for valuables. Chairs are upturned. A pair of empty picture frames lie on the floor. The table, which would have held the television, is bare but for a lace cloth. Painted plates lie in shards in the kitchen. The back door is open, and has admitted years of leaves. The floor and walls are rotting from rain and frost. Here the wall is warped, there the floor forms a dip. There is evidence of owls roosting in the window sills and on the kitchen shelves. Every window has fallen in, allowing ivy to take hold of the walls.

Vera says: ‘This will do well.’

* 

The day is still early. Peter, saying nothing, follows her out to the car. She has prepared well. From the boot she draws out two crates, which Peter takes inside. One contains disinfectant, sponges, scourers and old towels, the other hammers,
bolts, machine oil and screwdrivers. Along with the crates, Peter hauls one of the industrial-sized casks of water which fill half the car. A moment later, Vera comes back inside with a shovel, two buckets, a broom and a wireless radio. She tunes the radio to a classical station, hands Peter the shovel, and begins sweeping the dirt, leaves and shit from the kitchen floor into the bucket, to the tune of a waltz. Peter looks at her for a long moment then, standing in the dip of the sitting room floor, holding the shovel. For a moment she returns his look, challenge alive with something like humour in her eyes, and the matter of their task here seems settled. It is a large task. Speaking little, they work like machines, unceasing, until the afternoon, scouring walls, filling and unfilling buckets with water and filth, assembling a pile of junk in the yard and salvaging what they can—still usable cups and chairs, pots to clean, a table that might be repaired. Peter removes the fetid rugs, levers out the worst of the floorboards. They begin the more intricate chores of sweeping the dust, scouring the floor and kitchen cabinets. Vera ties a scarf around her head to keep the dust from her hair. Her rosy face is flecked with dirt. She looks healthier than he has seen her in weeks. This house will take time he does not know they have. Such exertion is the last thing he wants for Vera now. And yet her face disproves his inclinations. This is one stage in a long-held plan, he sees. He wonders how she expected to do it without him, for it is nothing she could ask of her mother.

Vera, having concentrated on the hallway and kitchen, has achieved a vaguely habitable state in those areas. Two chairs sit before a scrubbed table. The open stove is another matter. It is clogged with old ash, dust and mouse droppings. Having cleared and cleaned it, she throws in a handful of coal from the bag she has brought, and flings in a lit match, at which it comes alive in flames the house would not have seen for years. When she is ready, she calls to Peter, who is using the broom to clear the worst of the dust from the window frames. She sees that he has begun to remove the ivy. ‘Leave it,’ she says. ‘Come.’

Peter obeys and takes a seat at the table. The bread they brought from town is laid out with a round of cheese and a jar of pickles. From the disarray of the cupboards, Vera has resurrected two plates and two china cups cleaned over the sink with water from the cask. She takes the pot, also found and cleaned, from its place over the stove, and pours sweet black coffee into both cups. It smells wonderful. When Vera, seated in the chair opposite, smiles at Peter then, it is a
smile of the moment, hiding nothing and looking to neither past nor future, and it seems to expand the room. Perhaps she is relieved she will die not in her own childhood house, but a stranger’s. No memories within these walls to bear. Only the objects of frail suggestion; a photo in a drawer, a doll on the floor, a clock stopped at midday; more universal than personal. Abandoned, the rooms within which different people lived their lives were reduced to a similar composition of human relics, those relics they are now removing or restoring. What place had they to be there? Acting thus, were they any better than the looters? Vera hopes so, if only for the silent blessing her hands conveyed to every object, if only for the way she scrubbed that table as if it were a living thing, touched the walls as if made of human skin, and at the threshold of each room she entered, acknowledged the lives once lived there, and cleared away what dirt she could with a feeling that was love.

* 

It is five days before the house is habitable, a Herculean feat of which they are proud. The piss smell has faded; the faint reek of mould lingers. The cupboards are stocked with non-perishables from town and dry goods for making bread and soup. The windows are boarded in with pickets from the fence. Lacking a viable alternative, the bedroom mattresses are beaten, aired, turned, and fitted with the sheets and covers Vera has brought from home. From old doors and chairs, Peter has built the frame for a couch, which Vera fits with spare pillows and folded blankets. Outside of winter, at least, the rooms of the house now afford a Quaker-like comfort; the skeleton of quarters for living: a source of heat, a roof and walls, space for rest. The stove keeps them warm at night, and allows for all kinds of cooking. Of course, the coal, the matches, the water and flour Vera has so astutely packed will not last forever. But they do not need it to. There is enough that they should not need to risk passing the guards again, and Peter does not think about the inevitable day when he will be left there alone. Of these things they do not speak.

*
Later that week, Vera shows Peter about the Zone. Peter tries to imagine how it must have been in her childhood, when it was full of people and industry and fresh cement, knowing he would prefer it as it is now. She shows him the murky river of giant catfish. She shows him the abandoned streets of the pretty towns, the rotting wooden church not far from her old house, the primary school, the community hall in which her parents were married. She shows him the reactor from the distance, and the edge of the pine forest, which turned orange from the radiation in 1986. They spot two elk, a falcon and evidence of boar. Standing there beneath the trees, Peter wants to enter that forest as he has wanted few things in life. Vera sees this, but still she says no. The red forest is second only to the reactor in degree of danger. She moves her dosimeter slowly back and forth before him. It clicks furiously. They return to the stone house. Along the way, Peter’s eyes search everywhere for the right place.

* *

During the afternoons when Vera rests, Peter walks. He walks the streets of the main town, he stands in buildings in the company of owls; he watches the silent brown river reflect nothing. He loiters on the edge of the forest, watching for one of the wild horses Vera spoke of, whose stolid elegance recalls prehistory. He wanders the overgrown roads through the disparate farming villages beyond Vera’s, toward the other side of the Zone. Now and then he will note some detail that tells of a human presence—a cleared path, a potato patch, a cow, a smell of wood smoke—but a living soul he does not see. He is always back by the time Vera rises, with something to give or show her—a new nest in the willow tree, some irradiated souvenir from his exploration of abandoned rooms—a marriage certificate, a gilded crucifix, a volume of Pushkin. He is always scolded for these relics, and advised that they are not to come inside. Once, to prove her point, Vera waves her dosimeter over a child’s portrait in a wooden frame, and rams it in Peter’s hand as it continues to click.

Banished from the house, Peter’s daily finds begin to assemble in a kind of involuntary sculpture in a corner of the yard under the apple tree. He begins to regard it as a kind of calendar of his time there. Vera threatens every day to dig a hole and bury it. Eventually, Peter himself buries his lost objects.
He fixes the gate, repaints the door, clears the path of tall weeds. Sometimes together and sometimes alone they made dark bread, goulash and soups, for the suppers they have in the garden as the sun goes down, savouring the dog days of summer. What they speak of I don’t know, but phrases come to me anyway, like sound through glass, as I see them side by side, the late sun in their eyes, looking not at each other but at the other side of the street, their voices low and dry, muttering words that a foreigner would assume to address nothing deeper than the details of household chores. Only since their days in the stone house has speech between them been free. Slumberous, gazing without focus through the lighted trees, they address each other, in conversation carried on across gulfs of silence. For everything there is to say never can be said.

‘It is my belief that I was once a priest’.
‘In this life?’
‘No, another.’
‘I can see you as a priest.’

‘Maybe, in another life, we knew each other.’
‘The same life in which you were a priest?’

‘Sometimes I am jealous of your faith.’
‘I have faith enough for two. Do you believe that?’
‘Perhaps.’

‘Souls can live on.’
‘You are too intelligent for such fantasies.’
‘Yes, I believed that once.’

‘There are many things I would like to believe that common sense will not permit.’
‘You have not had the memory return to you of life in another body, time and country.’
‘No. I suppose common sense cannot speak to that.’
'There is something sublime about this ruined place.'
'Something only a foreigner would say.'
'But it is a different earth. In the landscape you discern the lineaments of life, the nerves, the naked spine. Revelation is possible. You can look upon the earth at a certain distance—the distance of having left it, bodily or in death.'

'I see my poisoned home.'
'I know.'
'But I have worked here for years since the evacuation, and there is peace in life's persistence. The adaptation of creatures people never allowed for.'

*  

'Our own language drew a circle of solitude around our world.'
'I have heard of such things among twins.'
'A lone twin is half a person. A living oxymoron.'

'I may resemble your sister, but I am Vera Yenin, born of Vladimir and Nina Yenin, one street over, forty years ago. I am one point in a genetic line evolved from a prehistoric strain of particularities that could never be replicated. As are you, Peter.'
'Such logic cannot diminish what is true.'
'Then let me appeal to your superstition: don’t you think that if your sister had wanted to haunt you, she would have? You create her ghost. That does not honour her.'
'She had no need to haunt me, as I have always carried her. Lost souls look for bodies.'
'Peter, that is a fairytale.'

*  

'I will tell you how she died—my sister Klara.'
‘Why? I don’t need to hear it.’
‘I told you on the ship that I would one day explain why I left home. You should know.’
‘Alright, Peter, I am listening.’
‘We lived in a larchwood house weathered by the atmosphere. The floor seemed to know when you were coming. When the ground froze in winter it groaned like a creature. It was winter then…’

* 

The wind was loud outside. Peter’s sister was peeling potatoes in the kitchen, her back to the door he stood behind. He was about to enter for an apple, but paused there, without knowing why.

There was a man at the icebox. His name was Avgustus Bli. Avgustus was the state official who came once to inspect their farm for the collectivisation of grain, and stayed. Peter’s mother had a beautiful face and a quick brain. They kept the farm.

At once, having filled his glass, Avgustus’s hand was at Klara’s thigh. For a moment she stopped peeling and stood there, looking at the wall with a potato in one hand and a knife in the other. She moved her head back toward his, turning as if to face him. She did not face him, but held herself inches away. They stood there as if united by the strange rapid breathing they now shared. Was she afraid? Or was the moon in her eyes? Peter could not see her face. He walked away before they saw him that day, and carried the secret for many more, like a dark firework he did not ask to own.

A week later, when he came to replace the hay in the stables, he found her brushing the horses. Before he could hide it, she seemed to recognise the truth in his face. But there was not a secret on earth he could have kept from her. The days when the secret drove itself between them were filled with a strangeness he had not known before.

She paused mid-motion behind the old mare Sasha, and peered at Peter from above her rump, with eyes that seemed to look through him into the rye fields behind. Sasha, sensing the disturbance, shook her head and snorted, cutting through the frozen atmosphere. Klara arched her neck at the ceiling, and, as if
unable to hold it in, gave a slow cry. She knew Peter knew, and Peter had nothing
to say. He left the hay at the door, and walked out into the early dusk.

That night, Avgustus felt like fish for dinner. He told Peter to go try his luck
on the lake, where he had drilled a hole in the ice. This suggestion asserted his
authority, got rid of Peter, and manifested dinner all at once, but Peter didn’t
argue, already exiled in his mind.

He set out with a stool, a radio and a can of worms just as the sun had begun
to go down, glad to be out. After finding the hole in the ice, he sat. Ice fishing is a
philosophical sport, and the only one to which Peter had ever been inclined. You
drill your hole, sink your hook, keep your worms somehow from freezing,
preferably through a method other than holding them in your mouth (he kept a
few in his palms beneath his gloves, beneath his coat). And you wait. The ice was
blue and brilliant. The pines around the lake threw long shadows. The radio
played a rousing orchestral march with a lot of brass, an alien sound in that
landscape of snow.

She came quietly. He had known she would come. The end of winter was
nearing, the ice was thinning, and their mother forbade them to ice fish alone.
Klara threw an oilskin at his feet and settled on her knees with a deep breath,
looking over the ice holding her gloved hands around a thermos. Hot apple tea
was their lakeside custom. A moment later, frowning with thought, she unscrewed
the lid, poured in a cupful of heat and held it out to him. He placed the rod
between his knees and balanced the cup between his fingertips, so as not to burn
the worms in his gloves. Seeing his need for a third hand, she set her own cup
down and took the rod from him.

‘Nothing yet,’ he said, to put something in the air between them. ‘Mother
can’t know. You can’t tell her,’ she finally said.

‘No.’

‘And you have to forgive me. How did you know?’

‘I saw you in the kitchen. Besides, you can’t lie to me.’

‘We can’t lose the farm. Mother needs him.’

He told her that their mother had lived through a war without him, and that
the farm did not come before his sister’s dignity. She said that the farm was their
home, and she couldn’t leave the horses. He told her he loved the horses and the
farm, but would not live to see her so dishonoured. There was a limit to what could be forsaken for the farm, and Avgustus had to know it.

‘Mother has grown to love him,’ she said.

‘Mother is blind.’

She looked at the ground.

‘I can’t challenge him.’

‘Do you want to?’

‘I don’t know anymore.’

Peter spat on the ground.

‘I can’t stay here any longer,’ he said.

For a long time, they looked out over the ice. He felt her shock in a cold wave.

‘How will you leave?’

‘I don’t know.’

As she began to cry, he looked at her harder than he had ever looked at a living creature, and knew her tears were not for their mother, or for the farm, or for shame, but for Avgustus Bli. He felt words forming on his lips, but they didn’t come. A moment later, with a gasp, she rose to her feet, the rod in her hands, her body straining to balance the tug. When Peter took the rod, he reeled out a shining carp, stunned by the air, which he killed with one strike on the frozen ground. They took the carp home to Avgustus for supper, and ate little themselves.

Peter contemplated the limits of his resolve to keeping Klara by his side, and, peering hard, found none. He had been restless for a long while before. He knew that elsewhere the borders were closing in, and with them his future. But Peter considered nothing without the silent clause, the condition that contained his sister. He could leave only because he knew she would leave her lover to follow her brother, and that was why she had cried.

* 

‘The snow was old by then,’ continues Peter, as if speaking to himself. Vera is just a statue beside him.

‘We had made snow people again, and they were melting—an apple-snouted lady with a chest like a nesting duck. A tall man without a nose and their coal-
eyed children. Our bones were ready for the sun.’

I don’t know what Vera is thinking. Perhaps a part of her has stopped listening, not wanting to know of the woman whose name she was given by a man who remembered another when he looked at her face. Perhaps she does not want to hear of death. And yet she bears the heavy presence of the man beside her, unloading his heavy words, as she has always borne him.

‘Klara argued with me for days, but I had been bound for Moscow long before I saw her with that miserable man, despite how I would miss my mother.’

‘So you left Siberia?’
‘I left on the train.’
‘With your sister.’
‘That was my wish.’

* 

Vera says nothing more, sensing the story’s end. Peter tells it like a blind man nearing a vale of new truths, each found and set down alone, amid a silence:

‘But in the end she wanted more time. She told me the train she would arrive on.’

‘When it came she wasn’t on it.’

‘The telegram came at night. It was mother calling me home.’

‘Klara was not reckless; emotion must have blinded her.’

‘She had wanted a last skate on the lake I suppose. Of course, she had not told mother.’

‘That lake is deep.’

‘Her body was not found.’
Death quickens everything.

Vera now needs rest in the afternoons. She wakes in the mornings for the breakfast Peter cooks her: jam toast, oat pancakes or porridge with powdered milk, which they eat together at the table. She takes her tablets and, depending on how she is feeling, either settles by the stove to read or knit and listen to the radio, or returns to bed. Usually, she takes a walk before lunch, alone. At first, Peter had accompanied her. Now, unless she invites him, he stays home, understanding her need for solitude. Afternoons belong to him. His routine grows around Vera’s, and just as it is a known fact between them, in the delicate fabric of their days, that Vera retires to her bedroom after their post-lunch conversation, so is it known that at this time, Peter leaves the house. He leaves against his better instincts. What if Vera needs him when he isn’t there? But he must continue to search. And so he walks with the anxiety of his distance from Vera, trying not to venture too far. He wishes he might find some kind of brass instrument; a bugle or horn, which Vera might sound in an emergency to bring him home. In the peace of this place, he would probably hear it. Yet if he was not there already, he wonders whether, at the last moment, she would call him. Whether she would call him, or face the end alone.

* 

It is not just the right place he must discover, but the vessel. From civilisation he brings to this task only what he could carry; the rest must be found. Only since coming here has he conceded that these things, brought as precautions, are now the measure of a task he must undertake in this very place. All this, he had hoped to do in Australia. But she would not come.

He has never been an improviser, his art has never thrived under the pressure of necessity. He feels it to be against his classical nature, this gift he has admired in others. Imagine him now, gleaning like a peasant from already-looted ruins, stalking about a radioactive forest, finding himself contending between disassembling some structure built of fossilising wood planks or leaden stone, or else augmenting some found object for a ready-made, making Duchamp’s piquant
absurdity of necessity. I have to concede it makes me smile. *The conservator must be aware of his own limitations.*

*

Behind the house at the back of the garden, there is a cowshed which has not seen a cow for a long time. One day while looking at the apples on the apple tree and wondering whether, considering the fact of his numbered days, he might try one, the shed catches Peter’s eye. He moves closer. It is evident that the shed does not interest Vera. Clover has almost entirely obscured its entrance. With the help of an old rake, he begins to clear a path. When he reaches the door, he has to try three times before the rusted latch gives. The air is stale, with a clean smell of earth. Daylight falls in between the roof slats upon the dirt floor. A collection of garden tools lean along one wall, beside an upturned cane table and chair and across from a pile of ancient straw. Peter sits down in the chair, and looks out the door at the garden, so impossibly bright from those shadows. The shed isn’t weatherproof and it lacks light, but these things are solvable. It is a fine place for working.

That day, by the hour at which Vera usually emerges, Peter stands before a sturdy new workbench running the length of the shed. The bench is made of two large doors fitted between the wall slats on either side, and he tests its strength by hauling half his body onto it. The bench holds out. Swinging down, Peter touches a hand to his chin, as he does when pleased for a reason he cannot quite believe, and gives the bench a slap for good measure.

The next afternoon, he returns. Onto the bench with careful hands he sets the items down: the brushes, the gold leaf, the pot of paint; the mask of Klara, his Penguin Book of the Dead by Budge. The objects glisten in the shadowed light, eyeing him with incredulous indifference. So little for so great a task. Looking at the objects, he sees only what he lacks. How on earth to find it here? Grand plans of perfection are the enemy of any achievement now. Authenticity has always been impossible; in this place, it is a joke. *The conservator should not make determinations that are beyond his knowledge or undertake tasks that exceed his skills.*

All Peter can aim for is the best he can manage, a result born of what
materials he can scavenge. His creation, despite its failings, will manifest his pure intent, faithful yet to the ancient truth.

* 

One day out walking, having visited the nearby wooden church and returning to the house along an overgrown road which cut through abandoned farmlets, few buildings of which still stand, although their relics are everywhere, Peter comes across one solution to his problem: a water trough of tin. After clearing the mass of grass which obscures it, he looks it over. The trough is rectangular and long, rusted but easy enough, being tin, to carry home, as it is unattached to the ground. At a time when he knows Vera will be resting, he drags the trough into the shed. Inside, with linseed oil and a scourer, he removes what rust he can. He does not yet concede that a farmyard water trough, from which swine and horses once drank, is the vessel he must settle for. There is time. In the shed he will assemble his options, and then he will choose.

* 

Does Vera suspect?

Peter worries about this, and other things. What is he doing, carving in a shed while she is alive and nearby? *Vera is dying, Vera is to die:* as he knew before she told him, yet still it is a kind of knowing owned by only half the body, the intellect’s weaker, drier half. Those words tell the plot of an impossible story, oxymoronically, even as he carves. The primitive in his body is incredulous as the opponents of Galileo: Vera cannot die. The heart denies what the imagination will not contain; Peter is no exception. He repeats the words until he hears them no more; still, that part of him disbelieves. Yet, he begins to see Vera now as the true figure of what, to his eyes, she has always been—a sceptre of a woman, with a foot already aground beyond; a persistent presence transcending a body, not truly human.

Yet in truth, Vera is the earthiest of women. No instinct is more native to her heart or mind than the instinct of sensing her place within nature’s landscape. Hers is an exquisite attunement. She knows when there will be rain by the dusk
and when a cow is ill by its lowing; she knows which hollows keep the wild honey and how near spring is by the geese. She can measure flour by eye and make herbal balms when no doctor is near. She knows how to measure the quantities and characteristics of radionuclides in any environment, and, within the ever-expanding limits of science, what this means.

I see Peter, defying all his powers of insight, obscuring Vera with a mirror that reflects himself.

My father was nothing if not a sham an by nature, and it was a nature experience had not changed. Far from dulling the sense in which, from childhood, he perceived a kind of living being in all things, his lifelong study of objects had served to sharpen this sensibility to an exquisite point. His world was animate; all orders of being were in some way aligned. He believed in the mysterious primacy of the senses and the truths they told him, truths which, for Peter, when touching an object or a human hand, when beholding the lineaments of a landscape or a human face, reached beyond the capacities of most men—in his own mind, if not in reality.

In the physical world, my mother took an equal delight, and yet her own enquiring mind turned upon uncovering the hidden operations behind the most empirical of truths. Peter observed no such delineation between earthly matter and the figures of his mind, although not necessarily for wont of trying. While he sought from the world of phenomena and ideas an answer to his own reality, she sought from that same world an answer to itself. So for both did the notion of the soul diverge: Peter believed in it; the woman he loved did not.

* 

In the evenings, over a wood board in his lap, Peter begins to craft tiny sculptures in Vera’s image out of the clay he bought in Kiev. He does this openly in Vera’s presence as she reads nearby, eyeing her as he approximates the traditional cross-armed standing pose with headdress. These placid-faced sculptures are *shabti* tomb figures who were intended to hoe fields and steer river boats for the Ancient Egyptians in their Afterlife. He would prefer to have had her pose formally. When he asked her to pose standing rigidly straight with her arms crossed against her chest in the garden one sunny day, it was, even for amnesiac Vera, a case of déjà
vu. She remained sitting in her chair, only looking at him darkly with heavy-lidded eyes. For a moment he felt them rearing up against a familiar rock face, each steeled for impact, before he smiled and turned away to rake the path instead. He does not ask again, but continues in the task alone with good humour. When the *shabti* begin to appear, for the purpose of drying, in the space beneath the stove, Vera does not look at them. After a while the stove is never without one or two, standing in defiance, like sentries before a sacred fire.

*

Twenty years before meeting Klara, a series of dreams induced in Peter an irrevocable conviction which he could never otherwise have entertained, for all his superstitious shaman blood. He met and rediscovered Klara, of whom he had also dreamed, through the wild interweavings of chance. It happened that she was born in a doomed place, in which the residue of Armageddon wrought a slow havoc in her veins. His weak heart would beat beyond hers; she, the beloved, would die first.

Vera does not believe that Peter was a priest in a prior life. She does not believe that any life is lived before or after the present one. She believes that Peter believes these things. Time has convinced her of God’s inexistence. The only eternity is on Earth. Vera contemplates the fact that, for better or worse, this tall, fine-boned man, years older than herself, is the person with whom she will see out her last earthly days. This warm-skinned, familiar stranger with a carved face, whose eyes and cheekbones are her son’s. She knows he loves her. Why? He emanates love like an urgent red current he tries to hide. It is a love Vera cannot own. It arrived in her life independent, fully formed and foreign as a botanical transplant. It needs neither her consent nor her reciprocation. Hardy as a weed, it thrives alone. Peter’s love happened to her, as had his child. Peter had all the holdings of memory to stake his love on. He claimed the implications of moments in days and weeks that she could never judge.

Why does she let him stay? Is it simply because she could not be here in her illness alone? She is facing her own end. Peter knew this instinctively. It seems that nothing need be spelled out in order for him to know it, and there is comfort in this. He is a man unafraid of mortality. He claims to love her unconditionally.
Vera does not want her son to see her dying. She does not want to burden her mother, who must look after him. Because Peter is there to look after her, Vera may choose the way she dies. This is a gift. She believes it is given by a man who essentially is good, without condition or design.

Perhaps she is wrong.

*

Peter decides on the trough, for he must now begin. One day in late summer, he finds the perfect lid. It is a solid cedar door. He has only the most rudimentary tools for carpentry in the toolbox from Kiev. With these and with the axe Vera brought to chop wood, the carving knife from the kitchen and the rusty saw in the shed, he makes do. Often when he is working, he composes the words he wishes Vera could hear. Peter’s diaries, at times, would also lapse into speeches to Vera, addressing all the things he knew he could never say:

No shroud or earth pit for you, my dear. This will transport you faithfully. I wanted to craft two inner holdings of cedar, varnished to the point of incandescence. I could not. Yet I have painted upon it old images in beautiful colours. The one glory of this crude vessel is to be your true image, brought with me from home, the mask I made of your face in gold.

*

One afternoon in the shed, having lunched on an egg sandwich with vodka under the apple tree, Peter is bathed in the light of his favourite time of day there, the radio crackling out a vigorous gypsy tune of violins inside the burnished gloom, inhaling the smell of moss and cedar. Standing before the workbench on which the cedar door is laid, Peter thinks about design, and dreams of his tools, cool and gleaming in their canvas roll on his desk in Australia. From the shed door, which stands ajar, a shaft of sunlight falls across the bench. He places his palms on the wood, feeling them warm. The lid needs sanding. With a piece of chalk, Peter begins to trace the outline of the trough, the border he will remove to ensure the right fit, leaving an overlap under which he will carve a groove to slot in the lid snug over the trough, before bevelling the edge. All I can do for her is my best, he
tells himself, and takes the saw.

He is too deep in concentration and making too much noise with the saw to notice, moments later, the sudden way the light is blocked by a doorway shadow. Vera stands there observing him for a full minute before he turns. For a moment, they look at each other, Peter’s face in shadow and Vera’s in the light. She walks away before he can think of what to say. She is meant to be sleeping.

*

When he comes inside, she is cutting bread in the kitchen.

‘I felt better this afternoon so I came outside. I heard the music.’

She speaks in a soft, even voice, cutting more bread than she needs to eat. Pale, she pauses for a moment to grip the table. Gently, Peter nudges her aside and gestures to a chair. He spreads jam on two slices of bread and sets it before her with a glass of water. Vera is holding her head in her hands.

‘I am tired.’

‘I know.’

She eats a little, carefully, and Peter watches over her. When she has finished, she looks at him seated opposite her, his large hands folded on the table between them.

‘What are you doing in the shed?’

‘Working with some wood I found. A gift for you.’

In the pause that follows, Peter deduces that this explanation is enough for now. He expects a retort about the poisoned nature of most wood he could have found nearby, or an inquiry as to what the gift will be. But Vera only nods, saying nothing. He cannot tell whether she believes him. In any case, he hasn’t lied.

*

Even had Peter not been a fatalistic sort, bereavement, a condemned heart and a fervent belief in an afterlife were all conditions sympathetic to a reckless task involving radioactive earth and the breaking of international laws.

What qualities has the ideal site? Evidently, he is bound by the possibilities of a particular geography. There is no desert here. All the same, it must be dry. It
must also be hidden to the naked eye. Peter is thinking of some dug-out underground. Inexperienced in such constructions, Peter sees he will have to learn. He ruminates on the poisoned things buried beneath the soil here, on Vera’s body becoming another of the things that this earth swallows up. The site of Vera’s internment demands camouflage, and so he situates it in the forest, underground, drawing an intricate map in order that the location should never be lost. The map is drawn in his diary. He marks the spot, amid a pine copse in the south-east of the Red Forest, with a V.

*

Vera is never going to return with him to Australia; this Peter knows, and he has long ceased asking. Her burial is another matter. He would like her blessing. He would like to explain it all, and to have her understand. He would like it to be a source of comfort. ‘Let me bury you, Vera’, he wants to say in a low, fervent voice into the silence as he observes her one day, sitting on the stool before the stove, and then to tell her how it is to be. The words hover on his tongue.

He has been on the couch reading Vera’s Gogol in Russian, surrendering again to the intricacies of that language, the more complex contractions summoning in him forgotten muscles, weak but living. Vera is waiting for their afternoon coffee to boil, staring glaze-eyed into the flames.

What if he had really said the words? Imagine them said—imagine afterward, the seismic reality of that room. She does not turn immediately when he speaks. Peter at first thinks she has not heard. A moment later, though, she does turn, meeting his eyes with slow deliberation. She has heard. Her eyes are clear, and hold his own for a long moment. Her face reveals nothing, and nothing is said. Finally she blinks, and stoops to stoke the fire.

A half-minute later the coffee is boiled. She places his cup before him. Who knows what then might have been said. For of course, he never does ask her, and never receives her blessing.

*
One evening, when Vera retires to bed early, Peter goes in to warm her room with a pail of embers, before sitting down in the chair beside her bed. For a while he watches her face, peaceful at first and then, for a few minutes in which her body turns back and forth, pained. When she is deep in sleep again, her breathing regular, he forces himself to look away, worrying she will wake beneath his constant gaze. Whatever the coming weeks might bring, he sends a silent word of thanks into the wild night, for her presence here beside him. He remembers the certainty he felt, so recently, that he would never see that face again.

Opening a Russian volume of Pushkin, whom he has not read since childhood, Peter finally sits back to read. Eventually, he sleeps.

While he sleeps, he dreams that he is chasing Vera through the red forest. Although it is the dead of night, somehow, he can see. As he races, he notes how his body, somehow, has become an extension of the forest. In his heartbeat echoes the heartbeats of a thousand nearby creatures in the trees, in burrows above and below ground. He feels the deep nocturnal hoot of the long-eared owls in his chest, imparting to him strength. His legs and feet seem capable of running forever; he barely feels them, and yet he never seems to gain on Vera. Barefoot, she runs on and on, tireless as a cheetah, weaving through trees, her hair wild. She wears a white nightgown he has not seen before, which trails behind her without impeding her speed. It is the white nightgown which lights his path, it belongs to the moon. Running through the night behind her, Peter realises that there is nothing he wants that he does not have. He realises, running, with Vera within his vision, that he is happy.

After a while, Vera looks back at him and smiles, as if she is going to wait for him. Yet she does not. Running on after her, suddenly Peter feels afraid. He wonders whether he is following the real Vera. He doesn’t want her to look back again. When she does, he screams. He stops running, and looks through where her face should be, to the trees beyond, before she tears off again and he is somehow impelled to follow.

The nightmare goes on, as the owls in his chest grow louder and he begins to feel the cold. Fluid as ectoplasm and without missing a step, Vera splits in two, and Peter must choose which figure to follow. When the figure he chooses looks back, it is his sister, and he pleads for the nightmare to stop. At that moment, the figure he is chasing stops running, and stands still, her back to him. He advances,
without wanting to. When he is a metre away, her head begins to turn toward him, and before she is facing him directly, he sees the plaster mask. She looks like a regal Venetian at Carnevale. Her eyes are black holes that look through him. It is the mask he made. Finally, when his eyes take her in again as a whole, he sees that she is no longer human, but completely remade in plaster. She does not move when he speaks her name. He finds he cannot go closer, cannot bring himself to touch her. Finally, he runs on, without knowing where he is headed, passing the statue frozen in the forest, passing her image, for the last time.

When he wakes, the room is cold, the owls are calling beneath a steady patter of rain, and Vera is awake, sitting up, staring for what he feels might have been a long time, at his face. He cannot read her.

‘Did I wake you?’ he asks.

‘I don’t know.’

‘I’m sorry if I did, it was a nightmare.’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

Glancing at her, he notes how she seems transfixed by some magnetic point within herself, her cheeks flushed, her eyes with a strange light.

‘Did you sleep well?’ he asks.

‘I don’t know. I suppose. I dreamt of the forest…’

She speaks the words as if to herself, before resting her eyes on him, for a moment in which he feels winded. It is not possible, he thinks, it is too much.

‘I…dreamt I was in a forest too, chasing you.’

‘Yes,’ she says, matter-of-fact, as if this is something she already knew. Peter worries she may be in the grip of some delirium related to her illness. Then, as if reading his thoughts, she looks at him, calm and direct and utterly sane, her eyes full of kindness and sorrow. Her voice is measured. He feels her struggling to guard her emotion.

‘You know you cannot chase me where I’m going. That’s why we’re here. Peter, at some point you must let me go.’

Silently, he nods. For a moment, they look away from each other in silence. When, looking back at her, he sees her brimming eyes, and her mouth pressed in so as not to tremble, he breaks. He lets the tide in, pleads at the ceiling, gasps for air on his knees. He can hardly speak.
‘Oh Vera!’ he cries, at the foot of her bed, grasping her bedclothed feet.

‘Don’t,’ she says, ‘please, don’t!’

For her eyes are streaming now too, when she vowed not to let it come to this. She refuses to look at him, as he says, ‘You know how I love you!’

At her feet, Peter weeps. She says nothing, she looks away, fury and fear on her face.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says, ‘I’m sorry, I can’t bear it!’

When his sobs die down to heavy breathing, some time later, he finally looks up at her, and is fixed with the most imploring look.

‘Stop it.’

He looks at her, a question on his face.

‘Whatever it is you’re doing in the shed, stop it.’

He stares, a dart in his chest, his eyes enormous.

‘You know what I mean, Peter. I can’t stand it. I need you to be here, with me.’

She is sobbing openly now, having lost the battle with herself. Astonished, Peter draws her to him, and she lets him hold her until her sobs die down.

‘But Vera. Where is it that you think you’ll go?’

‘Where we all go, Peter. Back to the earth.’

There are many things, at this moment, that he wants to say. The words well in him, in the silence between them. What he wants to say, I suspect, is something like: *it needn’t be that way.* But her fragility scares him, and he only holds her closer.

‘I’m sorry, Vera. I’m here. I’m here.’

* 

The next morning they sleep late, and after breakfast, walk all the way into Pripyat, the ghost city, stopping at the river. They stand on the frail bridge, leaning over the railing, staring into the water, seeing who can spot the largest catfish.

‘Look, right there,’ says Peter, pointing at a dark, submerged shape.

‘Where? Where?’ says Vera, her head darting around to find it. As she looks,
Peter, brazen in the cool air, walks around to encircle her from behind. He feels her body tense, like a hare, before relaxing into the embrace. He nuzzles into her neck, as she pretends to look for more giant catfish.

Later, warning him that they must be careful to avoid being seen by any of the officials working in the town, Vera shows him the town supermarket, the sports centre, the cinema, explaining them all from a narrative distance. From the open window of an office building nearby, they see the face of Lenin peering out from a mildewed poster, in which he smiles benevolently, his figure unnaturally large amid a crowd of robust, rosy-faced workers, above the caption, ‘We’ll give the Motherland bread!’

They step inside the crumbling preschool with its debris of heartbreak—one-eyed dolls, drawings of flowers, all amid a mass of Cold War era gas masks and droppings and bird feathers. Inside the nursery room atop an iron cot, lies the skeleton of a deer. From her pocket, Vera draws her Geiger counter, and holds it over the bones. It clicks on and on.

She tells him they cannot visit the reactor. It is too dangerous; there are workers there, and guards.

Tiring, Vera takes Peter’s arm. On the way home, they pass an elderly couple, part of the Zone’s small population of ‘re-settlers’, tolerated by the government as they cost nothing, have nowhere else to go and will die soon. The couple, probably far younger than they look, are hauling firewood back to wherever it is they live. They seem cheerful, and exchange a greeting.

‘It’s getting cold, now!’ says the woman, her sun-weathered face a map of lines, her smile flashing a gold tooth. ‘It’s time to burrow, like the animals!’

But neither Peter nor Vera wants to think of winter.

All day, Peter avoids the shed.

*

That evening, faced with the quandary of dinner and their diminishing supplies, they begin what will become, for the following weeks, a ritual routine.

‘What will we have?’ asks Vera, as Peter wanders over to gaze philosophically at the contents of the cupboards.

‘I’d say it’s time for Lobster Newburg, wouldn’t you?’
She disagrees. ‘I would prefer Beef Stroganoff’, she says, or Viennese Schnitzel or parmesan soufflé; any one of a succession of impossibilities.

Peering deeper into the cupboards, Peter clicks his tongue.

‘Well, it’s not my night. Looks like we’re just out of lobster. But it seems we’re out of beef too.’ Vera dares a smile at this.

‘Ah well. We’ll have to settle for potatoes instead’.

Thus is their delicate order for a time preserved.

*

We will be judged when the heart is measured, in the last hall. If the heart is true and the body whole, eternity may beckon. Life may be lived in death. Even if the real body does not resurrect, the vital presence of the being it held will endure, in a myriad of colourful incarnations. Souls do not die.

All this, my father Peter Volkov believed, in the wrong time and place to believe it. The idea of the human soul is the most persistent of proofless truths. If, of the ideas alive today, still quick from the pulse of ancient thought, there are those as fundamental as the soul—God, Judgement, eternity—there is not one as universal. Proofless, it haunts the poet, philosopher and scientist alike. It absorbs the theologian, it breathed into the atheist’s ear, it allows the dying no place to hide. Are we animal or are we spirit, and if we are both, by what mechanism are they tied?

It is not easy, this new order, in which he avoids the shed.

Around this time, Peter’s diary often lapses into a kind of shorthand. It is filled with lists of materials and tools, with geometric sketches and measurements. There is much I will never know. I suspect that, at this point, he felt physically torn. He did not want to hurt Vera, or ever again betray her trust. But how much did Vera comprehend of his work in the shed, of his ultimate designs? Even I can’t be sure, because I myself don’t know exactly what Peter’s work in the shed really signified.

When I think about Peter’s faith, that strange ancient faith he tried to reanimate from books and ancient artefacts, I feel that he might have found reason to deceive Vera, despite her trust, and despite his love. Because Peter’s faith decreed that, should the body be put to rest correctly, eternal life was possible. It
is tempting to laugh. But faith in eternal life is hardly remarkable—it’s just the methods the ancient Egyptians ascribed to that now seem archaic, deviant, and morbid. In another time and place, whole kingdoms practiced these rites.

I don’t know whether Peter and Vera had talked about how she was to be buried. I don’t know whether she expressed explicitly a desire to be buried covertly in the Zone, or to be buried conventionally in town in a grave my grandmother and I could visit. I like to think the latter was true.

Certainly, Peter was building a coffin in that shed. He was grieving, and needed something to do with his hands—I would not begrudge him that. But was a beautiful, unorthodox coffin, painted in the Egyptian style and made with love, his only design? That is the question I cannot answer.

Was the plaster bandage he brought from Kiev only for the coffin’s layer of cartonnage, on which he painted? Why would a man who truly believed he could grant his dying beloved an afterlife, not consider doing so, despite her?

* 

Vera retreats inside herself. Peter keeps a meticulous vigil. Perhaps, to signal trouble during those rare moments when he is not by her side, he gives Vera a bell or whistle, which she refuses to use. Peter keeps his vigil in the perpetual expectation of being asked to leave. But he takes his cues from her, is quiet when she is quiet, and is allowed to stay. Usually, they read, separately. Sometimes, they eat bread made by Peter to Vera’s instructions, toasted on a poker over the stove fire, with jam from the berries of summers far from there. Sometimes they pause to share aloud a funny or striking sentence. Ordinary speech has for the most part been replaced by something more primitive; a dense, all-pervading knowing that cannot and need not be signified with words. This is not the kind of peace either would have chosen, but it is a peace of sorts, all the same; when what is and what will be are known and bowed to.

One afternoon, Vera’s voice interrupts Peter reading *Lives of the Artists*.

‘You are a hungry man, Peter.’

He turns to stare at her. She half turns toward him from her position on the base of the stove, her hands moving absently to wind the red wool she has just unravelled from an old cardigan, from which she plans to knit a hat. She wears a
matter-of-fact look which retains in it a kind of dreaminess.

‘Desire devours you because you allow it to.’

‘You misunderstand.’

‘No. You don’t see what is clear to me. You have already what you desire: desire itself. For you it is its own end.’

These are the words I imagine Vera speaking to Peter at some point in time after he finds her again. Her phrases change; the meaning stays the same. And yet after years I cannot hear Peter’s reply. I have thought out some possibilities, none of them right. After a while the image of Vera waiting for the words fades in my mind, my ears fill with white noise, and I confront the fact that anyone’s guess is as good as mine. Perhaps the truth is that he said nothing at all, because, to the truth as Vera spoke it, there was nothing to add.

Let us imagine that, one day not long after this, Vera quietly dies.

I can only see her dying as quiet, if for no reason than her natural discretion.

*

Suppose this is the moment, now: Peter alone in a room of that ruined house, from which Vera’s live being has just receded. There he is, at the precise point a beloved being becomes a body, unanswerable, inanimate, unbreathing—which is the moment of love’s true reckoning. Only when the irreducible, animate presence of such a being departs is its weight in the living finally known. As the warmth of life is still leaving, the rift opens like the yawning earth. Desire comes upon him, the dusk light chased by dark. To absorb her. If he could not absorb this being with its native soul, he could preserve it.

So do bodies become objects.

After he inspects her face, her hands, like a lover, he inspects them as a conservator, assessing the composition of a patina, the settings in an irreplaceable ornament of an unquantifiable value. The conservator must examine, record, and diagnose the object in question.

He has never trained for this.

*
Perhaps, on the kitchen table atop a bed sheet, a candle or two alight for atmosphere, Peter prepares her body. *In conserving an object, correct procedures must be upheld.* His eyes are dry. He brushes her hair. With chaste hands he undresses her, blesses with water her cooling skin, before drawing over her a washcloth soaked in ammonia. It grows dark outside. The fire is out; he is cold. In the twilight gloom, Vera’s body is luminescent. Somehow then, in that forsaken room, Peter summons the ability to do what it is he does next; to mar that body with hooks and knives. *The conservator must now take action.*

I will not shy from picturing what he is now required to do: the organs are removed, what fluid can be drained in a primitive way is drained, the organs are replaced with muslin packs of table salt and baking soda; the cavity left by the brain is replaced with epoxy resin which hardens. The heart is left intact. He does not bother with the kidneys. At last, he weeps.

*This process would take seventy days, taking Peter into the depths of winter. Outside, the grass is so cold it snaps. When his nose runs, it freezes before he can find a handkerchief. During this time, the salt absorbs the moisture inside her. Finally, the salt is removed. The skin is anointed with fragrant oils and resin. The openings are closed with suture thread. Within a silk sheath, the body is bound in bandage ripped by hand. *At last, the conservator must revise the record, and administer final care.*

It is a vital moment, this binding. Irrevocable. When he draws the fabric over Vera’s face, when he binds it snug around her body, Peter says his last earthly goodbye. Vera is now a heavy oblong object in need of further packaging. Lacking an adequate burial chamber, the onsite ritual must begin with a body prepared elsewhere—I see it for some reason as the kitchen; it could have been anywhere. I see Peter in the gloom before her, a craftsman at his bench before he becomes a priest, binding the linen strips tight around her with visible exertion. Has he begun to think of the days beyond this? Can he imagine returning to his prior life?

When she is bound many times, she is ready. For a moment, perhaps in the dying light of afternoon, Peter steps back and allows himself in full consciousness
to behold the body, to feel the weight of her departure and her death. He registers, with the wonder of a long-ago self, this end to that day before Venus in the museum, to that luminous woman, ever familiar and ever strange, left to him now only in this frail form. After this pause, Peter manoeuvres Vera onto a door, and arranges her as best he can lengthways across the car, which he drives slowly to the forest, stopping to clear branches from the road along the way. He can only just carry her on his shoulder.

Finally he reaches the dugout, shielded from humans and animals by a thatching of branches made inconspicuous by a layer of earth and leaves. Setting the door down, he clears the branches from the opening. He looks at it now, and wonders if he could have done better. It is no pyramid. It is the width of four standard graves, six feet deep, the best he could do in a few months of afternoons alone with a shovel and trowel. The casket is already there, the lid lies in wait. Having eased himself down, he lowers Vera vertically.

Finally, he sets her in the water trough of tin upon which all the spells are painted. His measurements were correct. She fits. It is now that Peter commences a ceremony that could never be rehearsed.

*I compel myself to picture it, a ludicrous vision: he reads from the Book, the Budge translation, as, for all his accomplishments, Peter cannot fluently decipher hieroglyphs. Like the performance of all ritual divorced in time and place from its native origin, this ritual is a re-enactment. I see in it an aspect of farce. Peter’s is a faith grafted from the material remains of a dead culture—the artefacts of museums, the consequent deductions of historians. I wonder whether at some level he balked at the sheer absurdity of his predicament, reciting the translated vignettes of a religious text with no true living adherent, before the bandaged body of a dead woman, inside a forest pit in Ukraine. Considering the fervour of the religious convictions that put him there, I suppose I have to doubt it.

Is it curious that when I think of him there in the final hour of his task, my first instinct is always to laugh? It is too ridiculous. Tragedy often is. For Vera is dead, and her body will do nothing more as a mummy than decompose
more slowly than she would have were she buried in the dress she chose, at a site her mother and son could have visited.

*

It is always curious when learned intelligence and deep superstition converge in a single mind, and the combination tempts all kinds of theories. I think, for example, of the psychic laceration of losing a twin, and the turns a grieving mind can take. I think of the seduction of seeing a dead beloved in one who breathes; of a wound closing around a fiction. And I think of how easy such answers are, daring me to mistrust them.

Peter claimed to draw his faith from a series of dreams, an involuntary experience of such narrative coherence and visceral intensity that it left him without recourse to doubt. My culture does not hold such dream visions to be much beyond a broken psychic code; others, such as those of shamanic Siberia, are known to differ. How is Peter’s intelligence itself to be judged? The human brain is capable of all kinds of wonders. Twins in particular have often been known to develop between each other certain esoteric inclinations, notably various forms of extra sensory perception. Peter came from a land of shamans. Who is to say his father was not some gifted tribal chief of the northern mountains, imparting his own charge to his son’s blood?

For years I have tried to fathom the desperation of a creature—so sensitive, capable of such tenderness—who could choose to deny so violently the wishes of a loved one in death, and in the fervour of faith, find moral justification for such an act. How did he plan to deflect suspicion, after it was done? What was he to say to Nina? Would he assert that Vera, driven mad in her wait for death, had thrown herself drugged into the poisoned river? No-one would look for a body in there, and this is a story people could believe of Vera, strong as she was, autonomous, fatal. Of course, Peter was not a murderer. His assault was more subtle, and did not end with a dead body alone. His assault was to the integrity of his own professed love, to Vera’s soul and memory, and to a dead woman’s mother and son.

*
I began this puzzle in order to look upon it as a whole. I hoped to gain the distance necessary to make sense of it—so that this unrest about my own history would recede finally into the background of my life. The making sense is quite a task, I realise now, as it entails the judgement of a story put together with many imagined pieces. I think of one of Peter’s Egyptian urns, restored to wholeness with replication clay, forming the greater shape that the true remnants suggest. The question I come to is this: should Peter be judged by the ultimate end which his actions aimed to realise, or only by what it was that reality finally permitted? The answer depends on the degree of certainty one has in the solidity of his intentions. Were these intentions ever breached by the doubt of moral conscience, the uncertainty of whether, ultimately, they were good and right? Could anything but the intervention of gods have prevented his carrying them out? I look at what evidence I have—his diaries and letters—my feeble childhood memories do not count here—and squint into the distance.

*

Now, return to the point before Vera’s death, and envision a different story: Peter and Vera in the stone house three months after arriving, in autumn. The coffin is made, the burial site chosen; Peter is prepared. Life has continued on much the same—Vera’s solitary morning walk and Peter’s free afternoons, shared dinners at dusk and frail jokes about food. Vera’s condition is weak but unchanged. They have both lost weight. There is less and less to separate their bodies from the bitter outside air. They feel at times exquisitely light. Soon it will be too cold to remain, but neither speaks of this.

Peter, living to see out his task and neglecting his own terminal condition, has been out of medication for two weeks. He thinks of Vera finding him dead in a field. He thinks of not being alive to bury her. Peter can no longer ignore the fact: he is only waiting now, waiting for Vera’s death.

And yet this death does not come. Winter is on the way, with the early frost and a bitter chill which seeps through the cracks in the walls and which the most ravenous stove fire cannot touch. When it rains, it also rains inside. Neither wants to be the first to declare that they must leave.
For this is the real story, the story Peter did not envisage. Vera does not die. Euridyce has turned from the Underworld, and Peter must consider his position. The water trough-coffin with the golden mask remains forever in the cowshed. The burial pit lies empty in the forest, waiting to claim some other creature—an elk, a deer, their hunter.

* * *

That Vera will not die—not, at least, for many years—is a fact that does not sink in for Peter until they have passed a week in Vera’s civilised town, in her apartment again, opposite the neat park, sealed from the bitter Ukrainian cold.

‘He says it isn’t common, but it happens. He says the tumour is now the size of half a rouble,’ says Vera to Peter in a mystified voice, after a visit to her doctor.

‘It is wonderful Vera, so wonderful,’ he says in a voice she finds strange, supposing it is shock.

Vera’s cancer is in remission, and Peter’s heart is seizing. By phone, he wrangles an agreement between a local doctor and his own, replenishing his store of medications. He feels time running from him now, like a vital fluid of his own body.

In the following weeks, as Vera’s vitality returns, Peter begins to discern the true distance of the pyramids. His feels his appalling mortality, the exhaustion of his skeleton, the futility of plans before a hostile fate. What of his own body? Peter is in a foreign country. He is with the one he loves. He is tired.

* * *

That winter, without formal discussion and as if by natural progression, Peter settles into Vera’s spare room. At a pace so gradual that the change at first escapes them, Peter begins to accumulate there the materials of living—trousers and shirts bought one by one, English novels, paper and crayons and Indian inks, a cheap card table for writing, easels for their art sessions.

In the months before Vera returns to work, they do many things together. Vera shows Peter her favourite parts of Kiev and the Polessia region. They visit museums and sit in churches talking. They visit expensive restaurants for Lobster
Newburg and drink wine. In St Petersburg, after a recital by the Philharmonic Orchestra, they are caught outside when it begins to snow, and Vera buys Peter a Russian winter hat with flaps that he cannot wear without provoking in her fits of laughter. They have long, slow mornings over coffee. The cold confines their drawing and painting to inside, so Peter oversees Vera’s mastery of the still life. When he goes to the market, he often returns with the oddest fruit and vegetables he can find for her to draw, turnips and misshapen pears, Chinese cabbage, swedes, celeriac. In the evenings they take turns reading aloud from Peter’s volume of Poe. They make plans to visit Lyviv with Ivan in the spring.

There is now an altered light to Vera’s face—it is not the light of Klara, it is not the light of Vera when she was ill. The bearing of her body and soul has lost its former weight. Whether it is due to having looked into the void that is the atheist’s death, and being granted a reprieve; or due to coming finally to own some part of the tenderness she was enveloped in—for the first time since Peter has known her, Vera is happy. Now, he asks for no more than this.

*  

Vera wants to see more of Ivan. Since her return, and the delivery to her mother and son of her good news, they have visited more frequently. The fact is that, as religiously as Ivan loves his mother, he is afraid of her. She is to him a distant figure, a sad-eyed and changeable goddess who comes and goes like the figments of his dreams. Each time he farewells her, he imagines it as the last time. Compared to his mother, Ivan’s grandmother is a stoic presence, dependable as a ledge in an old landscape which is always warm. It will take time for his mythical image of Vera to be displaced by the Vera who is simply a woman, and his mother, who is now well, and there to stay.

It is not only Vera who wants to see more of Ivan. Peter’s unlikely fatherhood has been a late revelation. He delights in his son, and, with fascination, attempts to discover him as he might an artwork.

At some imperceptible point in the course of things, Vera realises that she prefers life with Peter around. As this is a fact her brain has little to do with, she does not interrogate it. I imagine that Vera expressed these feelings to Peter in her own way—of course, as to how exactly, I don’t know. But I imagine that Peter
might not always have slept in the spare room.

Peter’s visa has expired, but he will not be returning home.

*

Vera knows nothing about the state of Peter’s heart. He has access now, through a local doctor to his medications at an exorbitant price, but these medications are no longer enough. He does not want to tell Vera of his difficulty breathing in the night. He hides from her the nausea he experiences without warning throughout the day. He hides his swollen ankles and distended stomach. He is exhausted, at times, he can barely move. Every day feels stolen.

When there is no longer a choice, Peter tells Vera, if she has not already guessed, that he is now the dying one. It was not beyond either of them to see the joke in it, but the joke would not have been felt for long. In the end, they had just over a year, and for that time I believe they were happy.

*

Peter dies in his sleep, from a heart attack, and is spared the indignity of being an illegal in a foreign hospital.

His funeral is a dim memory. Before the priest in the cemetery, my mother shed tears without motion or noise. I remember thinking she looked pretty in her black lace dress.

She probably had a list of people to contact when Peter died. Ezra was the only one who made it over. He was a wisp-haired, delicate man in a trench coat, older than Peter, with a kind face. He gave me an Australian dollar and a toy koala. After the service, my mother spoke with him over tea and cake in the kitchen while I pretended to watch TV. I realise now that they must have talked, among other things, of his understanding with Peter that, whenever I came to Australia, his guardianship would always be mine. When Ezra’s airport taxi arrived, we said goodbye.
Vera is alone again. Her life is full of time, and she longs for the absorption of work. She contemplates the possibilities of her remaining years as if she is not the one who will live them. At this point, on the heels of Peter’s death, my grandmother dies, and I, Ivan, the child, re-enter this scene.

The afternoon my grandmother is admitted to hospital, I wait in a foyer full of echoes, with a chocolate bar and a fat nurse who has a voice too high for her body. Despite my fear for my grandmother, I am enraptured by the spectacle of a foreign place. When my mother appears before me in grave-sounding shoes and a yellow dress, I realize my grandmother must be gravely ill. I stare at her as she speaks to the nurse in tones that tell me she is flustered, as the light from the window behind makes a halo of her hair, until the nurse pokes me and I come to. Holding my mother’s hand on the way to the car I hurry to keep pace, inhaling the heavy floral smell about her, trying to discern it. After strapping me in with a deep sigh, and arranging herself on the driver’s side, she turns to me, and I decide the smell is similar to that of the shopgirl who gives me butterscotch at my grandmother’s chemist. I see that my mother’s eyes are not blue as I had thought, but grey, and forgive myself as I cannot remember her ever having been this close. She is saying something about my grandmother needing to stay at the hospital for a little while, and that for now I will stay with her. She delivers this news as if it is something to be borne, as if she is expecting some tantrum to contend with. I long for my grandmother, and wish that my mother were there because she herself truly wanted to see me. I wonder whether she behaves the way she does because she thinks I don’t love her. Considering this along the road, my chest tight with guilt, I think about what I can do, short of laying bare my feelings to her outright, to make my love clear. In the end, I decide that it doesn’t matter what I do or what my mother thinks, as long as my grandmother gets better.

I don’t know what I am expecting when we reached her apartment. Milk and biscuits and a board game, perhaps, or the heart to heart we never had. I chastise myself for this later—’can’t you see she’s tired?’ because when we are inside, she sets me in front of the television with a ham sandwich and retires to bed until the evening. I watch ice hockey and a program on the life of Lenin until the room grows dim and hunger impinges on my sense of propriety, inducing me to tiptoe around the strange kitchen and form a meal of cheese and rye.

I think my mother is surprised by the depth of her grief at Peter’s death, and
when my grandmother finally succumbs to cancer, her despair is total. She begins to move as though her body is too heavy to carry, neglects to brush her hair, and speaks as if words cost money. The occasions when she leaves the apartment induce in me a paralysis of fear. More than once, she is out until late at night. She seems to exist on tea and crackers, and I hear her shuffling about at all hours of the night. Sometimes when I get out of bed to check on her she will look through me as if I am formed of ether, at others she will freeze and peer at me as if stricken, and say something soft. Once I find her surrounded by locks of her own hair, having cut it, at a quizzical angle, into a new-wave bob. She hoots when she sees me, and turns to and fro like a movie star as I tell her she looks modern. Another time I catch her baking a sponge at two in the morning, and, because she is in the mood for my company, I stay up to help her ice, cut, and eat a quarter of it, before school. Most of the time, though, I find her in a chair or at the table with a cup of cold tea, gazing in the dark into the mid-distance as if shattered by a thought.

During that period, when she is well rested, she spends much of her time continuing the task Peter had set for her, only now without variation, painting curiously arranged assortments of flowers, withered vegetables, and small animal skulls in the style of the Dutch memento mori masters. I long to join her in painting, but am too shy to ask, and so I watch her. Like a naturalist observing the seasonal progression of a landscape, I note her brushstrokes grow more refined, her shadowing more true, the composition of objects in the frame more grounded, and feel an almost paternal pride. Yet I sense, somehow, that the object of her efforts is not in the final work, but in something esoteric; the way the process holds her body and her mind, perhaps; the way it obliterates time.

I watch her desperately always, hoping to learn her, hoping to be seen. I am neither a guest, nor at home. My grandmother has died, I have lost the radiant point around which my life has turned. I am unmoored in grief, move like a somnambulist throughout the absurd rituals of school, and arrive home to formless place where the chance of dinner, conversation or an encouraging presence cannot be calculated. I am living with a ghost.

As my body absorbs the daily shock of this new life, I develop strange habits. Like my father, I diarise the minutiae of every day, living my life on the page. My inclinations become increasingly influenced by magical thinking, a superstition
which converges around my mother’s safety, and compels me to, among other things, tie my shoelaces in triple knots, tap my nose at thresholds, and avoid the number nine. I ask my mother to dress wounds I have purposefully sought. I speak to myself in the school yard and sleepwalk in the night. I douse myself in the brand of talcum powder my dead grandmother wore. When my mother is in bed, I sit at the table and pour tea for my grandmother, who looks at me with mirth and love, asks me how school was, and tells me to be kind to my mother. I begin to hoard. Broken glass I find walking home from school, a bird’s nest, my mother’s shopping lists and lipsticks, photographs I find of her as a child, empty jars.

The exquisite moments when I arrive home to find her animated and dressed, with dinner on the stove and the will to hug me, only make me more ravenous for everything that is not, ravenous enough to believe for a long time the change she promises on those good days is just over the hill. For many years I will be visited by the dream I begin to have then, a dream of standing on a stage, not singing or dancing or acting, not doing anything but standing still, as my mother, in red lipstick and a gold ball gown, rises before me in rapturous applause, her face brighter than the lights.

This state of affairs endures as long as it does, I suppose, because by that point my mother is isolated, without family or a job, and wary of friends, neighbours, and her doctor. Terrified of losing her, I take money from her purse and become admired by the local grocer, baker and butcher for my precocious contribution to household chores, although after a while they begin, with concerned brows, to ask after my mother. Of course, it was always unlikely to last for long. When a hawk-eyed old woman in our building begins to catch me on the stairs after school, and asks me in for milk and jam biscuits in her cosy lounge where we listen to Bach over dominoes and joke about the regality of her cat Pushkin, it is as if her apartment door opens right into paradise. In her quick-witted and gentle way, she ferrets out the truth without asking me to tell it, and I discover my fear being drowned by relief. Soon after, my mother’s local doctor visits for a cup of tea, discerns my mother’s madness, and sends her for treatment in Kiev, while I am placed for the interim in a boarding school for wards of the State.

*
It is strange how a piece of paper can so change a person’s position in their landscape.

Some years ago, when I had begun to re-read my father’s diaries, I found a fold of papers in his *Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*. It was a letter to me. I had to sit down. Because I appeared as such a minor character in the story of his accounts; because I was possessed by this story as a reader and not an actor; and because of the transience of his real presence in my life before his death; the sensation I experienced then was that of the author, hitherto removed and semi-mythical, breaking through the suspended white quiet of the page to address me, not as his son, but as his reader. Among other things, the letter told me that he had planned to leave several other letters with his lawyer, for me to be given when I was older, a plan for which, it seemed, he died too soon, as I never did receive them. After I read it, I held it, feeling my mind rear up against an object too large for thought, like a ship unable to launch, unequal to its opposing force. It was a verge I had come to before, at other moments when I had been confronted by life’s exquisite happenstance, when I couldn’t help but wonder at what might otherwise have been, and, more unbearable, what, in my ignorance and in face of an indifferent fate, might be yet.

* 

**For Ivan at sixteen**

Now you are sixteen, but today you are seven.

Who have you become?

I am dumbstruck by the realisation that I will never really know. You are the wild-eyed creature of another woodland, you are pink and tender to a point that pains me, trying to hide your raw little soul. I wonder if you were born to be so grave.

For a time I believed you would come home with me, to my large island in a different sea. Your grandmother is old; there would have been no alternative to this. It was likely to spare you this fate that your mother came back to earth. And yet I wonder how it would have been.

I would like to know you. At such a late time in things, nothing surprises me more
than the lightness you bring me. In the afternoons when you are home from the school you hate, and afternoon sunshine fills the main room, I bring in your milk and the plum cake your mother makes, and you sit in the chair across from mine, straight-backed and holding the glass in your lap, as if we were in church, as the sun gilds your head and I wonder how on earth you manifested there. It is the kind of Slavic cake I could also have bought in Melbourne, to remind you of home.

Sometimes during our conversation, which usually consists of my questions and your polite but hesitant answers, you fix me with a look I can hardly bear. It is utterly your own, and yet it is hers. I don't think you intend to betray all that is in this look, when it passes across your face sometimes. It is a look of innocence, unassuming, and full of grief; so much older than your years. I feel a terrible weight at my feet. Never do I feel more answerable. I worry you will break one day. And I will not be here to hold you.

I feel myself being much more formal around you than I would like. But we are strangers, and I am not used to children. If you are angry, if you dislike me, you are too polite to show it. You are a solemn child, solemn as children often are when they have seen war, or lost their mothers, although you live in relative peace, with a mother still alive. You starve for her, I know. We are two hungry souls at the end of a particularly beautiful spring, and tomorrow is Saturday. In the morning I am going to show you how to plant marigolds, and at noon my lawyer Mr. Dakov is coming to meet you. Vera is making two kinds of pie. It will be an important day.

Do you notice the way I sometimes stare at you? It must be the stare of one enraptured by a stolen curio. Incredulously, I look for evidence of myself in any part of your creation. Knowing you so little, I can only speak for the physical. We share the same mouse shade of hair, though yours is lighter. Your chin has the ghost of a cleft which time might reveal to be mine; I wonder if you might have my nose? Reproduction is, of course, the only kind of immortality most of us can be certain of. Your arrival in my life—so singular and so unlikely. For so long, I’ve had one foot on the threshold of eternity. Just as I am closer than ever to leaving, here you are. Right now the sun is falling across my hand, and the breeze from the window which is moving the leaves is in my hair, and I can hear the birds, and at any moment you and your mother will walk through the door with the groceries. I think of how I was once ready to leave this earth, and imagine the gods laughing somewhere. Alas, it is my inclination that has changed, not my condition. No greater anguish than this. What I would give to stay. You must know I am unwell. My thoughts on this subject follow an unending course of opposing paths. You are at once too old and too young: for the unthinking way I would have had us grow to be at home with each other; for the things I want to tell you within this mean little gulf in time, ending at some near time decided by my cells, each day of which
already feels stolen. But this day is all there is, and you, my son, at this age: seven, a magical number, the number of fate. I am glad you are home. In my country, without your mother, your childhood would have been lost to your grief in an alien place, where at night it would have seemed no shadow was any longer simple for its being forever known—the bed you dreamed good dreams in, the garden outside you played in, the dimensions of the walls—all these, by impostors replaced. And not only shadows, but life’s every sensuous dimension—the tongue you heard and spoke by day, in sleep; the perfume of the plants native to the seasons; the texture of your breakfast bread. From the undulation of land and building and the kind of light they are lit by, to the attitudes of local people, and the animals in the street, what was ordinary reality, all you had known, would have been rendered an otherland of your mind, defined from dreams only by the memories that would animate every suspect new day. Time would pass; that land would deepen in you, a dark weight, asking less of your heart in the day-to-day, but asking more of your mind to recall it was real. This is one comfort to me—you will not know geographical exile. As for the other kind, I cannot tell.

How these two years—two years! I find myself marvelling—have raced. For what I realise is perhaps the first time in my life, my heart is truly heavier for someone else than for myself. This is an appalling claim for one of my age and situation in life. It surprised me to realise it was true. How spectacularly the curtain can collapse on our faithful vanities, Ivan, if you don’t shy from this twilight. It is the most delicate savage the world has known.

It is both an absurdity and a dire necessity to preserve some means of answering the questions you will doubtless be left with when I am gone. You lived for years before we met, I hope you will live for many more after me. Our time together will have been little more than a course of the seasons or two. My failure to make an affecting impression on you is not all my fault. More than anything, we have simply not had time. You have no reason to trust me. Yet I wish you would open yourself to me a little. You are a small wooden soldier with impeccable manners and a very reluctant tongue, you move with more hesitation than your mother when she didn’t know who she was or where she belonged, and you have the eyes of an owl, in which I can see the reflections of most anything I think of. As much as I hope you will one day be happy and at home in this world, I also hope you will retain something of these qualities. I can only assume your strength is Vera’s. It could not be mine.

It is with the most supernatural effort that I project your little image into that sacred future where you are grown, tall I am sure, and good like your mother. These letters will tell a one-sided story, full of the suppositions of a father who writes for a son in a mythical future, who at present is a seven year old boy he knows barely, yet loves
absolutely. Remember that, if nothing else. My greatest concern is always that you might question whether you were loved. My greatest hope is not that you should come to some kind of retrospective love for me, which, being unearned in life, would not be real, but that you might in some way understand—understand enough that my shadow in your past may rest easy; that my memory in your mind may give way to no ghosts. Misfortune deprived you of a true father. Instead, you will receive a letter like this every year for the next ten years. Paper is a poor substitute, I know.

I would like you to know my story, which might be traced to an origin any number of years or days before or after the one I will choose. This is always the way with beginnings.

*

Not long ago, I took my Labrador Roy to the park and thought of the day with my mother, all those years ago on the other side of the world.

When I saw her again, a few weeks after she was committed, her movements were no longer erratic, and when she looked me in the eye I saw sanity. In the playground of the city park, red with leaves and overlooking a stream of traffic, we sat on a bench feeding pigeons, and then she turned to me.

‘The sadness is like a vagrant fog,’ she said. ‘I can’t control it, and it always returns.’

She told me that she should have foreseen what might happen while she was still rational, and that she would never forgive herself for the last years. She told me she fell pregnant during a time she could not account for, and was unprepared. She had no money and needed to work, so my grandmother looked after me.

‘I want to fight for you but I fear I will fail you again. I cannot let my illness poison you’, she said. ‘You are a wonderful boy, and I take no credit for it. I wish I were different.’

She began to cry, and I gripped her arm as my throat closed in.

‘I love you Ivan, and I am sending you away.’

*
Roy’s favourite playmate was there that day, a boxer cross called Elizabeth. I nodded to her owner, an elegant Englishwoman called Estelle, almost twice my age but whose beautiful breasts I strained to ignore. Like Roy, I was happy to see Elizabeth, who gave him a run for his money, and left him docile and happy, if a little frustrated when he lost a wrestle—she’s an alpha girl. Each time, Roy whined from the back of his throat, as if at an unnatural injustice, before inciting her to play again.

I saw a dog give birth once. I had a school friend whose mother fostered strays, and in this instance had found one of them, a scruffy little terrier, to be pregnant. I still remember when the pups came out, one by one, each still in the sac their cells had formed in, until the mother licked them free, and they began to breathe, their seal-fur slick with amniotic fluid. They moved around blind as moles, pink noses to the ground, paws splayed. The pups and their mother knew by instinct what to do, the scene was quiet and calm, except for we humans gathered around, gushing.

But humans, too, know what to do when the time comes. Like death and sex, childbirth is the most commonplace thing in the world—until it happens to you. I tried to imagine what it would be like when Ann gave birth. Resisting my distaste, I YouTubed ‘childbirth’ and watched for myself, biting my fist, at the pain and indignity of pushing a human head from a tiny hole. I assumed she would never be the same again.

* 

A few months after Ann left for Queensland, I arrived home from my interim sales job in antiques to find Roy in a seizure in the lounge. Before I could call the emergency vet, it was over. He rolled over, registered my arrival, and sidled over to me as he always did, panting and waiting for a pat. I kneeled down before him and held his head, looking into his eyes. His gaze was as intent as it always was, challenging for a play, his tail wagging the whole of his rump as his forefeet began padding up and down in impatience. I couldn’t discern any sign of distress. I gave him a liver treat and watched him eat it. What had happened? I put the kettle on and began to Google. When I looked up next, he was on the floor again, seizing, oblivious to the world and to my calls, taken over by the convulsions of
his body. By the time we arrived at the vet’s that evening, Roy’s brain had him locked into an unstoppable circuit. He paced mindlessly in circles, and as I listened to the vet, I had to shield his head from colliding with the legs of the operating table. He had no spatial awareness, and he couldn’t stop pacing. He didn’t register my voice calling his name. The greeting he had given me that evening, I realised then, had been the last. He no longer knew me. I travelled through the next twenty-four hours in a dream of grief. The colours around me seemed horribly bright. That night I had left him under observation, and when the call came in the morning to tell me that Roy, after sedation, had not improved and that the only potential treatment for what was almost certainly a brain tumour would involve invasive surgery interstate, I told them I was coming to say goodbye. He was fifteen, and I wanted his life to end with dignity. When I had held him as well as I could against his impulse to keep pacing, and said I loved him and nodded to the vet, I felt him settle into me, as the anaesthetic travelled from the needle into his bloodstream. I buried him that day, in his favourite blanket, under the lemon tree in my father’s garden. Afterward, I drove to a nursery and bought some white and pink cyclamens, and planted them in the soil above him. Finally, I cried. I cried as I hadn’t cried since I was a child, orphaned and in a new country without the words for speech. I thought about how Roy and I had now taken all the walks we ever would together, played all the tug-of-war, shared all the Vegemite toast. The day was insolent with sunshine. I sat for hours on the verandah, staring into space, until the air chilled and the wind began to make everything whisper and move. For the longest time, I looked at the cyclamens on Roy’s grave, poised and shuddering in the air. Life and death were happening despite me. My best friend was gone, and I had been wading around in my own misery for the last months of his life, blind to what mattered. The baby had happened, and would soon be in the world. Ever since Ann had sent me an ultrasound image—labelled with a “g” for “girl”—now and then at the shop or at home in between readings of my father’s journals or episodes of Antiques Roadshow, I had Googled the age of the foetus. At twenty-five weeks, I discovered it was the size of a swede. It was beginning to be able to sense touch, and imprinted already on each fingertip was the genetic blueprint of ridges that would identify its singularity among all others. At thirty weeks, it was the size of a cabbage, with eyelids and eyebrows, gaining weight by the day. I read of the
symptoms Ann might be experiencing—heartburn, mental fog, constipation, and wondered how she was coping, carrying around this growing cabbage we made. The notion of the child, despite the medical facts, felt remote to me. I realised I still thought of myself as something of a boy. Fatherhood seemed like a train meant for other passengers, and yet there I found myself, at the station. Soon, the baby would reach the weight of a cantaloupe, and finally a pumpkin. Regardless of what I chose to do, the baby was fast approaching the end of its equation with edible plant products, and would be born, a discrete being in the world who would need her own name. I realised that I still loved Ann, as I always had, and missed her like a limb, but in my misery and fear had pushed her away, obsessed with charting the infinite variations of my mental landscape. Finally, her grace dawned on me. She had, at every point, kept the door open to me. She had listened, she had let me speak, she had not sought to dismiss or diminish my expressions of fear and horror, knowing better than myself, perhaps, the reasons. She had offered me no platitudes, and in the most difficult of circumstances, she had tried to understand.

That evening, I visited Ezra—the man in this story who eventually adopts me—and told him about Roy. We played scrabble over wine, and he asked if I had heard from Ann. I said that last I heard she was good, still in Queensland, and in the eighth month now. ‘You know, Ivan,’ he said, sitting back from the game, ‘You’re not destined to repeat history. Your father was troubled by many ghosts, as is your mother in her way, both of them good people who scarred you despite loving you. But you have already survived them. You have survived your childhood. You are a different person from both of them. Let yourself live your life.’

* 

Despite her absence in my life, and despite my having, according to Ezra ‘survived’ her, Vera was still alive on the other side of the world. That is, she was still alive until a week after my conversation with Ezra, when I answered my phone to hear her solicitor informing me of her death. She was fifty-seven. And so the line was drawn under her story and mine: we would not meet again. And I would never reply to her last letter. I had been resisting this reply for months. As
always, she had asked how I was. As always, it was brief, one page in her large, looping hand, intent and effortful as an engraving. She didn’t seem to like email. I still wonder whether it was only guilt that carried the letters to me, one a year usually around my birthday, with sometimes another to follow. In many ways I wished she didn’t bother, because of the way these letters condemned me to bend over a single piece of paper for hours longer than the words took to read, thinking of her and hating myself for hoping that each time, there might be something meaningful to decipher between the lines. Without effort, I committed most to memory, anyway. From the last letter I learned that, after six-months postdoctoral fieldwork in Japan surveying the rodent population of Fukushima, she had been living through the Ukraine winter, writing up data in a tiny university room with a temperamental heater and an office colleague who sighed instead of breathed, and ruined her focus. I treasured these details, and I worried she was cold. She didn’t deserve it, but I couldn’t help it. I delayed replying because I didn’t know what to say, because the letter this time might never have ended, and because wagering my heart on her was more than I knew how to bear. Yet whatever I do, even now she is gone, there remains inside me the child who refuses to relinquish her.

* 

We all long for origins; we are all hungry for the knowledge that we are, or have been loved. The grief I still feel is the grief of my seven-year old self, who gained a father only to lose him a year later; who regained a mother only to realise that her distance would never be eclipsed.

It was late autumn when I returned to my mother’s town for the funeral. Winter was impatient that year; even as the red leaves fell you could feel the frost on your neck. In the street you could observe in people a stiffening, bodies braced against the air. The funeral was simple. It rained on the day. For the sake of both my parents I wished the cemetery were not so ugly and new. There was no formal service. The gathering was small. Cousins I’d never met came, old school friends of my mother, colleagues from the Institute; there was red-faced Mrs. Chenkevich from the local bakery, her neighbours Marya and Viktor, a solitary man in a hat who, for all I knew, might have been an old lover. People talked in low tones, shook hands, smiled, cried. The women kissed my cheeks and peered into my
eyes, the men took my hand firmly in theirs and said sorry. The chief mourner is always something of a spectacle. They were kind. Valiant, we stood on around the open grave as it began to rain. I did not speak; a priest delivered a sermon with a Biblical verse on goodness and humility.

Was she good, was she humble, Vera Yenin, my mother? Suddenly I no longer knew the meaning of those words. I remembered an image of her then, waving goodbye once, from an open door. It must have been spring, because I can smell my grandmother’s roses. I am craning my neck toward her face, which is half obscured by sunlight. Her wave is limp and unconvincing, and I cannot read her expression. Her stance is hesitant, her feet uncommitted to her decision to cross the threshold. I am conscious of a warm solidity behind me, my Baba, who is holding up my hand and clucking to me in melodious Russian to wave back. I don’t seem to feel a great need anymore for this ritual of goodbye, and allow my limp hand to be moved like a puppet’s. For it has happened so many times before. My mother was a golden-haired mystery to me, forever raising her hand in greeting or farewell, a fickle priestess in a story I did not understand.

As I watched the coffin being lowered into the ground, the plain rosewood coffin I ordered in from Kiev, the coffin she would have wanted, I felt more like a cousin than a son, and wondered whether I had ever really known the woman being laid to rest. We had exchanged intermittent letters, and spoken on the phone once or twice a year, but I had not seen her in years. Who was she truly? What would she have been like, had she not been so scarred? Mourner’s questions, unanswerable.

By any name, and in her own incarnation, Peter loved the being that was my mother, regardless of whether he also loved in her the image of another. Did Vera love Peter? For certain she was fond of him, with a patience which seemed self-replenishing, unending, and from a source that did her good. His death left her devastated. If she never felt love for Peter, when she knew him first or in the end, who am I to say whether fondness was enough, or more than he deserved?

*I*

I threw the first handful of earth. Rain running down my face, I stood before the adjacent plots, one old, one new. In every excruciating detail, he must have
imagined this, the way she would go down. Vera lived until an aneurism took her at fifty-seven; Peter had been cold in the ground for ten years before her.

Peter never knew me truly, and yet he loved me. Some love is unanswerable, biological, a fact of tissue. It is blind to the details of circumstance, inherent, predestined, and we must forgive it this. That is how I see his love for us both. I do not know whether he ever questioned his right to carry out his plans for Vera’s burial. It would seem inhuman for him to have not. And yet, I find myself believing it of him somehow. Perhaps certain decisions, made within a universe of logic structured by realities outside our own, yet guaranteed by a person’s unquestioning belief, must ultimately be judged on their own terms, by the ethics of the reality they answer to.

Standing there, before their graves, knowing they were both gone to the ground and together, the feeling I had was not grief, but peace. Without absolving Peter for what he might have intended for my mother, I believe he was convinced that, in the matter of Vera, the end justified the means, and that end was pursued with love. I choose to call it love. Ferocious, mad perhaps, arguably unfounded—but love nonetheless. A love that blurred the boundaries of the self, on the level of the soul. I tell myself to remember this, and I begin to understand.

* 

The day after the funeral, I took a tour of the Exclusion Zone around the ill-fated Chernobyl nuclear reactor, replete with its spectral sarcophagus. In recent years, the Zone has become popular with tourists and zombie video game enthusiasts for reasons I can understand. But I was not going there to appease an impersonal curiosity. I was going to see the territory which had once been my mother’s home. It was something I had meant to do for a long time.

I had a private guide. I met her in the foyer of the Lenin Hotel. Lena was vigorous and small, wild-haired, about my age. I was relieved. She had a ready smile and a quaint grasp of English. I sensed Lena was one of those people who come alive in the cold, and she learned all the basic facts of my life before we reached the car. The driver’s name was Sven. He was a walking Russian cliché. A stolid, unsmiling presence in a fur hat, the product of heavy stew, vodka, and cigarettes, all the things that led so many Slavic men to early death. He had a habit
of making sly underhanded digs at Lena which she translated for my benefit: ‘Ah yes, Lena likes the cakes’ (Sven’s contribution to our discussion of Ukrainian cuisine); ‘Lena would do better to marry a fat American than guide fat Americans in Kiev. Then you divorce and find a good Ukrainian. Sorry Lena, but you know I’m taken’ (his thoughts during a conversation regarding Ukrainian tourism).

We arrived in the Zone after two hours of driving through scattered villages of wooden houses and naked coniferous scrub, stopping at the checkpoint to show the border guards our papers. That morning, there seemed to be a surplus of officials for the tasks at hand, and a pair of them, on the other side of the checkpoint, sat on a bench drinking coffee, muttering and bemused in the company of a grinning Alsatian. When we passed through, and I stepped on that damp winter ground, it was not as I had imagined. That ground felt like all ground—solid; my body registered no sudden charge. I paused for a moment against a tree to collect my thoughts. I had told Lena I would not be requiring a standard tour, the day’s itinerary was my own to decide. She would guide me where I was allowed to go, oversee my conduct on behalf of the government, and answer what questions she could. Of my reasons for visiting I told her no more than was necessary: family history.

* 

I was looking for the stone house. About its location, Peter offered little: it was on a corner in the village of Balev, opposite a field, beneath an apple tree. My hope was that, amid so many demolished and collapsed houses, finding one that remained standing would not be impossible.

I believe I found it. This house was made of stone, situated beneath a tree heavy with apples. I pressed open the door as Peter must have done. The hall’s rotting floorboards were falling in. I edged down the more solid side, reached the wide central room, saw the stove, the boarded windows. The roof was half-collapsed, broken tiles joining the floor’s compost of leaves, feathers, dust, dirt and excrement. There was elegance in the disintegration; to every corner an asymmetrical balance of the kind sculptors toil for and nature always provides: the way the peeling render of a wall grades into raw mortar, the shape of an abandoned nest balanced on an exposed beam, the arrangement of broken
porcelain fallen to the floor years ago. The back wall had begun to crumble from above, creating a plateau of white plaster and mortar below, and permitting the pines behind a triangle through which to look. The house had become a roost, a nest, a burrow. By imperceptible increments for twenty-five years, the outside had been coming in. I imagined the house in five years, in fifteen, alive in death, devoured from within. Until the day no remnant could be seen; the total return to earth. I asked myself why I did not feel sad. There was little evidence to suggest that Peter or Vera had ever been there. For a long time I stood there in the back room of that house, upon the droppings of rodents and owls, beneath the white glare of half a sky, my chest a void, registering nothing until after my eyes found certain objects on which to pause. Disinterested objects, inanimate, arbitrary until they speak. In the intelligence of objects: the capacity to grow a shadow they never owned; to wound, privately, only you. As I listened to my own breathing amid the discreet shufflings of that place, and what I imagined as the sound of the plaster’s dissipation; as I inhaled the strange smells of desertion, I thought of how deep griefs are generational. Held in the cells, they are passed on. And so I saw—a table crudely repaired; a scrap wood couch now covered in filth. In the cupboard, a bag of coffee, my mother’s favourite kind. In the bedroom, warped and damp, Gogol’s *Dead Souls*. And yet the wound was dull, for the skin was numb. I did not linger.

My parents threw long shadows. In some ways, they have lived for me more truly as creatures of myth, than as real people of my own flesh; so truly that, at times, I have forgotten the unremarkable nature of my own life. And how could they really have been otherwise, knowing them as I did, so barely and so briefly? The fact that, like my father, I myself was exiled, at the age of eight, to Australia, by my mother, to live under the guardianship of Ezra—exiled by her and from her, from my tongue and my land, a few weeks after the day in the city park—only ensured my parents’ immortality—never would they shake those shrouds of myth.

Autumn has arrived, and set alight the Virginia creeper on my father’s house. In the morning, the sound of the wind in the dry leaves, and the hint of sun through the chill gilding everything, hit me in the guts mid-step on my way for
milk, and I am eight again. Everything is strange. People who look like the ones at home, despite being more smartly dressed and of a wider variety, speak like creatures underwater. The streets are full of foreign wonders—flashing lights at night and glass towers reflecting the sky, Chinese ducks and spaceship cars, billboards of beautiful women and cinemas promising other worlds. There are signs everywhere, heralding all kinds of desire. Everything is open and working, nothing is shut down. People buy food from giant stores that gleam like hospitals and play music. Anything and everything can be bought and sold. This planet seems wider and brighter and full of money, but I cannot translate it. I miss the countryside of dachas, I miss cabbage dumplings, the sound of church bells, snow. In all her madness, I miss my mother, and I miss my grandmother most of all.

When I arrive in Melbourne, Australia, at the airport called Tullamarine like some exotic ocean reserve, it is five in the morning and I have slept two hours in two days. When I am led, by the flight attendant’s hand, to the man called Ezra who I have met only once before, I don’t know what to say. With a smile and a comic bow he greets me in Russian, and I am relieved, until he looks blankly at my consequent rush of words. We are both silent for a moment, and I gaze at our reflection in the glass doors behind him, which open to the city of my new life.

Ezra’s house looks like a castle to me. It is shadowed by two willows, in a wide street near the city. It has two floors of dark wooden furniture from other centuries, a garden of ferns and herbs, and a pond with fluorescent fish. The house is insulated as a tomb from outside noise, but full of its own echoes. It smells of sandalwood polish and the coffee Ezra brews incessantly. I map it by coming to know the antiques—an ex-carousel horse, a German tin plate wind-up ship, an Egyptian chest full of figurines, a Chinese tapestry of women bathing in a river. On one wall is a Papua New Guinean tribal mask of indeterminate gender, which I speak to at night. I delight in Ezra’s macaw, Akhi, and believe he must in truth be a pirate.

I know only a smattering of English taught to me by my mother and Peter. I do not own this foreign tongue, and want to curl within my code of Russian. In the first few months Ezra takes time off work and teaches me himself. He sticks words to their objects using Post-its for ‘wall’, ‘chair’, ‘cup’. We go to the beach, that yawning eternity of horizon, like nothing I have seen before, and roll the sounds around. ‘Sea’, ‘sand’, ‘ball’, ‘dog’, I repeat after Ezra, like a second parrot.
After the embarrassment of board books from the local library, gnawed and bearing the marks of toddler teeth, I improve rapidly. We graduate to fairy tales, and the abstract syllables of the English tongue begin to animate my mind with the same witches and forests I saw reading Russian. We watch Mary Poppins without commentary. Our conversations grow more comfortable, and he declares me ready for school. The peacetime holiday over, I enter the mid-term battleground. I learn the cruelty of children. I fear the death which comes several times a day when my accent is mocked, when I misunderstand a teacher’s question, when I eat lunch alone, feeling the eyes of strangers and my distance from home, feeling the cavern in my chest that might devour me, that knows my mother is gone. But I am stronger than I feel, and resurrect daily on arriving home, where Ezra and Akhi await me.

I think sometimes of what might have been, had Ezra not existed to take me in. Would my mother have tried harder? Would I have gone to a Home? Would I be a soft-spoken daydreamer, soon-to-be father, working in antiques, with a fondness for cheese?

In my odd moments between customers in the shop, since Ann told me the news, I’d been on Ancestry, typing in strange names, mapping my family tree. I did it absently, on the sly, as if to avoid catching myself. I didn’t want it to cost me anything; I didn’t want it to count. I typed in Vera’s name, I typed in Peter’s name, neither of which, I discovered with surprise, felt much more familiar to me than the tree of names that grew from them, names of strangers I had never met, who had lived lives I had never heard of in towns and countries I had never seen. Then I thought of Ezra, a man whose ancestral tree knew nothing of my own, and in whom I had found, without condition, my real home, and wondered what, in the end, blood counted for. I suppose that as a father, I’ll find out.

My family tree has now reached the proportions of a giant oak—seven generations back on both sides. I suppose it will only end when I stop searching, or else, when the records stop. The strangest thing, the thing I cannot and will never be able to shake, is the mystery of the second branch on my father’s side. His name sits by a question mark. I know what the second name should be: Klara Volkov. But where are the records of her existence? I have liaised with genealogists online, I have emailed libraries in Siberia, and yet this branch of
branches remains bare. Of my father’s beloved twin sister, I have located not one record.

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That day in the Zone, I walked back up the crippled hall into the day blinking and, empty-handed, closed the door. Lena, resting against the car, stomped out her cigarette.

‘So, we go? We find the next house?’

I drew a breath, and the words, when they came, surprised me.

‘No, I’ve seen what I came for. We can go.’

This had not been my plan. I had come to see the stone house—why would I not also visit the nearby ruins of my mother’s childhood home, or walk twenty metres from where I already stood to the cowshed studio of Peter’s futile labours? According to his diaries, I had every reason to believe the glorious coffin would be there still, languishing in the gloom of twenty-one years. Yet I realised then that I did not need to know, did not need to see it there, on the bench as he had described it, or to find that there was nothing inside the shed at all. Because it would change nothing, and I wanted to go home; because I wanted to be present when my daughter was born.

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Forty-eight hours after that day in the Zone, my plane flew into Tullamarine, and I emerged into an afternoon so bright it barely cast a shadow. Riding down the highway in a taxi, I felt as if I had somehow left a part of my body behind. I had traversed a great distance in my mind, but still didn’t feel I had arrived. And yet I was moving, propelled finally by some primitive force in myself that was stronger than my reason or my fear. Ann and the child couldn’t wait for me, and even if it was too late, I had nothing to lose that I had not lost already.

Before leaving for the funeral I had sent Ann an email, in which I said things I didn’t want to scramble in a phone call: that I had thought a lot about the past year, had acted upon Dr. Goldman’s advice in writing about my parents, and hoped to talk to her in person. While Ann wrote little in response, she did agree
that we should meet. I also discovered that she had moved back to Melbourne, and all I had to do to see her was visit her parents’ house in Eltham.

I set out the next day in the afternoon, still light-headed from sleep deprivation but wired from nerves. When I pulled in, Ann was standing on the verandah, her arms crossed, bearing a tight, shy smile. Turning off the ignition, in a strange expansion of time, I watched her move into the light. Her hair had grown long. I wondered if the lipstick was for me.

It was only when we were in front of each other, she on the steps, myself on the path, that I registered the size of her stomach between us, and almost immediately felt that I had stared at it too long. I looked up at Ann’s face, at once familiar and strange, suddenly unsure of what to do, how to answer to what had passed between us. Before her clear gaze, I had the sudden feeling that she knew my mind better than I knew it myself, that she could see the outline of the hours to come, and that her gaze itself was the measure of my recent reckoning with history. I searched for words, wanting to preserve for longer this instant in which anything seemed possible. ‘It’s good to see you,’ I said finally. She only let out a breath and put her arms around me, and held me in her strong arms for longer than I had a right to expect, and said close to my ear, ‘I’m sorry about your mother’, so that I smelled the sweet, herbal perfume she always wore, and remembered again the softness of her neck. When she was facing me again, smiling her warm, wise smile with its edge of laughter, I wondered why visiting her had taken me so long. For some reason then I noticed her bare toes, painted a lurid shade of green. ‘You never used to paint your nails.’ She laughed. ‘Time goes slowly here. Come in, Ivan, I’ll make some tea’.

By chance or design, Ann and I were alone in the house that day, except for her parents’ marmalade cat Doris, who positioned herself on the kitchen counter in order to regard us from a thoughtful distance, while we sat there at the kitchen table as the sun fell. I told Ann about the funeral and the trip to the Zone, and she answered my questions about the pregnancy. She was due in three weeks, and booked in at the Royal Women’s. Things had gone okay apart from a succession of migraines and, lately, disrupted sleep. She compared the final part of the pregnancy to being marooned. ‘I don’t have to tell you, Ivan, how too much time and liberty let the mind turn to dark thoughts’, she said with a grin. Despite her longing for the stimulation and routine of work, she had cherished the chance to
read and take photographs with the kind of single-minded absorption that had evaded her since university. She showed me the prints of the final series she had taken at Harriet’s. Shots of wheat fields and green plains rising and falling into hills and valleys, horses in paddocks and rusting sheds, sheep skulls, and sheets on a line airborne by wind, always below a sky that almost swallowed them, blanched to nothing, dark with thunder, or dissolving blue. When we had finished our tea, we moved into the garden to sit on the porch steps, in air traced with frangipane, a perfume that somehow always recalled the bittersweet feeling of every summer I had lived. But it was late in the season, and I could feel autumn coming, quickening everything. We looked out into the fading light, at magpies darting about an oak and the brightness of camellias, and I took a deep breath.

‘You’ve been so much kinder than I’ve deserved’, I said. ‘I’m sorry I haven’t been here.’

Slowly she nodded, her eyes on her feet, as if she had already heard my words.

‘Look at all the months, measured by your stomach,’ I said.

Tentatively, I put my hand to it, and looked at her again. She gave me a dry smile, and moved my hand higher up, where a second later I felt a kick, a strange fillip, like a frog’s heart.

‘Yes, Ivan’, she said. ‘It’s been a long time.’ I couldn’t place her voice.

That night, I drove us to a Chinese restaurant for dinner. As we talked over bowls of noodles, I discovered that Ann had not been happy with Harriet, a fact she didn’t try to hide, although her references to the reasons were discreet. While she enjoyed Harriet’s irreverent sense of humour and general gusto, the fact that they had little in common had become painfully apparent. Harriet’s lack of curiosity about non-finite things, things unrelated to sport, food, sex or money, had left Ann lonely and starved of conversation, a predicament made worse by her isolation. She missed her family and friends in Melbourne, and knew that she had to come home, and return when she could to nursing.

‘I’m sorry it didn’t work out,’ I said when she finished speaking, and she nodded with a wry expression as if she doubted my sincerity. ‘But I’m glad you’re home.’ Finally, I laid down my cards.

‘Ann, I want to be the father’. She blinked at me and shrugged.

‘You are the father, Ivan.’
'Yes, but I want to be there, for the baby, and for you.'

‘Really?’ She stared at me in thought, and put down her chopsticks with a sigh.

‘You made it very clear from the start how you felt, Ivan. I’m going to be fine.’

‘I mean it’.

‘Okay, then listen. It’s been really good to see you, and you do seem well. But I’m giving birth in three weeks. The last thing I need is for you to force yourself to do this out of guilt, or the desire to punish yourself, or to redefine your identity. I’ve never wanted you not to be involved in bringing up our child, but please only sign up for this if it’s for good, for the long-haul, for the rest of your life. And only if you want to be a father, irrespective of our relationship’.

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Three weeks later, and not for the first time, I asked Ann to move back in with me. We were in the delivery room when I floated the idea. Ann was half delirious from gas, and even though my request for some had been declined by the nurses, I was also on the verge of delirium from exhaustion, adrenaline and congratulatory champagne. The cord had been cut, and we were alone for a moment, our strange arrival between us like an exclamation, like daybreak after war. Our mouths hung open and our eyes stilled on her, a newborn wild-eyed and stricken as a nocturnal creature wrenched into light. I told Ann that at her word I would have the spare room set up within a day, and then she nodded, and finally I cried, in astonishment of the return of everything I hadn’t wanted.

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Evie has my eyes, my father’s eyes, and time might reveal her to have my mother’s smile, but she is entirely herself. Each day is a discovery. In the ferocious, near-clairvoyant honesty of children, she reflects me back to myself, erodes my vanity, and shows me the hilarity in hubris when life is so brief, although for her it is still eternal. But my old fears have given way to new ones. I might fail her in some way, I might burden her with my own ghosts, I might not
always be here. The obsessive spiral of myself has blown open and cannot be contained. It is at once terrifying, and a great relief.

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I dream sometimes about the headless marble woman discovered off the coast of Israel, the day I flew in for the funeral. I know it is her, although in my mind the coast where she is found could be any coast at all. In the dream I somehow see her face. When I wake, I try to recall it, the line of her nose, the shape of her eyes and lips. I know I possess the memory of this precise geometry, as when I close my eyes and reach for it I feel it resting in the dark, yet sinking as I reach. In bed, Ann looks at me through the twilight between wakefulness and sleep, and as if to a diviner asks me what it is, but I can’t explain. Her face lives for me only in sleep, when my anchor is thrown there, off that coast which is never here.
Source Notes:

I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to Svetlana Alexievich’s masterpiece of literary journalism, *Voices from Chernobyl*, from which I have drawn in writing Vera’s account of her experiences. I have referred to Keith Gessen’s 2005 translation, published by Dalkey Archive Press, London.

In addition, the quotation in Vera’s note to Peter on page 43 is from Martin Ferguson Smith’s 1969 translation of Lucretius’s *On the Nature of Things*, published by London Sphere, London.


Finally, the italicised lines on pages 87, 100, and 101, are from Andrew Oddy’s *The Art of the Conservator* (1992), published for the Trustees of the British Museum by British Museum Press, London.
Figure 2: As above. Detail of reproduced image from *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (Budge, 2008)
1

Movements of negation & metonymy: the elegiac mode

Now I am dead you sing to me
The songs we used to know,
But while I lived you had no wish
Or care for doing so.

– Thomas Hardy, ‘An Upbraiding’

In the *Idylls*, a collection of pastoral elegies by the ancient Greek poet Theocritus, William Watkin, in *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* (2004) identifies a moment that illuminates a defining paradox of elegy. This is the paradox of materiality, inherent in any attempt to create ‘physical, material works of art out of the very event that destroys our own physicality, in other words, death’ (Watkin, 2004: 6). In fact, Watkin’s articulation here of the strange way in which the textual artefact of elegy finds its being via an instance of death speaks to a broader truth of elegy, which is not limited to death. While traditionally, elegy is most frequently mobilised by the authorial urge to somehow figure and account for the absence entailed by the physical death of a human individual, elegy is increasingly responding to forms of nonbeing, absence and loss that are not contingent on the death of a human body. Such elegies are still implicated in the paradox of finding their “presence” through an instance of absence, however. Moreover, as Watkin suggests, ‘the problems of elegy remain those of language itself’ (2004:6). In the passage of the *Idylls* in question, a goatherd laments losing
his lover, describing an occasion in which he learns a ‘bitter thing’ upon smiting ‘a poppy-petal’ lying on his arm (1924:35). When the petal makes no mark of pigment on his arm, the speaker, figuring the poppy-petal as his own loss, declares ‘the love-in-absence made no smear but withered away’ (1924:35). In Theocritus’s smiting of the poppy-petal, Watkin observes ‘a foundational moment of modern cultural modes of mourning’, illuminating ‘the three-part structure of commemoration’, which he enumerates in the following way:

First, we have the problems of materiality involved in getting the petal to speak; then the means by which the subject of loss comes to know itself as a subject in the realisation of love-in-absence; and, finally, the importance of a clear encounter between this personal loss and the more public gain represented by the lover’s failure to speak through the petal and the poet’s auspicious and felicitous record of the event (2004:8).

In this structure, the speaker in the poem relates the experience of trying and failing to obtain a lasting trace of his loss, or physical reminder of his dead lover’s absence, through the allegory of the petal that leaves no smear. This failure to obtain some material testament to the truth of the speaker’s loss is described by Watkin as the speaker’s losing a second time, that is, losing even ‘the event of loss itself’ (2004:8). Of crucial significance here, however, is the fact that, ultimately, a testament does exist—that of, as Watkin states, ‘the poem itself’ (2004:8). At the same time, the speaker confronts the altered reality of his identity as a being in the world in the aftermath of his loss and the felt absence of his dead lover. Finally, there exists the movement between the different entities of author and speaker as represented in the elegy, in which the author, Theocritus, essentially enacts his speaker’s private mourning in the public arena of the published text. In this way, the speaker’s private loss and ‘failure to speak through the petal’ is configured as the author’s ‘public gain’ in being able to make an ‘auspicious and felicitous record of the event’, a perhaps prototypical instance of absence mobilising literary production (Watkin, 2004:8). Working from the assumption that the goatherd’s grief was once the author’s own, Watkin observes that: ‘Theocritus the poet may have been Theocritus the mourning, spurned lover, but by the time we get to hear about it, Theocritus the poet is a professional doing
a good job of mourning, and Theocritus the lover is a skilled actor in the drama’ (2004:8). As Watkin elsewhere observes of the dead subjects of Yeats’s 1918 elegy ‘In Memory of Major Robert Gregory’, ‘[t]heir presence in art, their bid for the eternal, is predicated on their absence in life’, a truth exemplifying ‘the paradox of mourning in art’ (2004:54). The poppy-petal in Theocritus’s poem functions, of course, as a metonym for his love-in-absence. Watkin’s delineation of the wider elegiac operations represented by the poppy-petal emphasises the paradoxical co-movements of materiality and metonymy, at work across language, mourning, and writing, and which converge in the elegy.

This chapter examines the paradoxical co-movement of negation and metonymy in elegy (as both a form and as a writing-act), whereby the force of each movement depends on the effacement or distance of the object to which literary language and elegy (and mourning itself) refer. In doing so, it will discuss Roland Barthes’s elegiac reflections on literature, loss and writing following the death of his mother, in his posthumously published *Mourning Diary* (2009), in dialogue with the work of Maurice Blanchot, William Watkin, John Bowlby and Hélène Cixous, among others. In doing so, this chapter aims to outline the key operations of the elegiac mode with which this essay is concerned.

I.

**Negation & metonymy in language**

*The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines metonymy as ‘[a] trope in which one expression is substituted for another on the basis of some material, causal, or conceptual relation’ (2012:online). As Hugh Bredin notes, the diversity of metonymical structures might encompass associations between ‘thing and attribute, cause and affect, container and contained, an object and its material, sign and signified, maker and product, and so on’ (1984:100-1). Common examples of metonymy at work within ordinary speech offered by *The Oxford Dictionary of*
Literary Terms are ‘the bottle for alcoholic drink, the press for journalism, skirt for woman, Mozart for Mozart’s music, the Oval Office for the US presidency’ (2008:online). There remains debate as to whether the trope of synecdoche, which specifically relates a part to a whole or a genus to a species or vice versa, should be considered as a discrete trope or as a subset of metonymy—either way, it is clear that their movements are intrinsically tied. For the purposes of this discussion, metonymy is taken to include the operation of synecdoche, thus following the example of thinkers like Barthes and Derrida who routinely invoke the term “metonymy” when referring to synecdoche. Beyond its function as a figure of speech within both everyday and literary language, metonymy has been applied as a kind of analogical or allegorical movement of association at work within a vast range of cultural and psychological processes, from painting to speech disorders. In this essay, metonymy is similarly employed as an analogical structure by which to interrogate the (inter)relation of two or more contiguous or proximate things, as a relation of simultaneous intimacy and distinction between a subject and an object, a whole and a part, or a sign and a signified. In this and later chapters, I will consider the ways that this metonymic relationship complicates rather than reinforces traditional subject-object binaries, through their mutual implication as discrete yet intrinsically connected entities, each “bearing” the other and thus transformed by that other in a relation contingent upon exchange, dialogue and responsibility.

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The production of meaning via linguistic signs is itself a process necessarily mediated by absence. To cite theorist Kevin Hart, a basic tenet of that which we call a ‘sign’ is something that ‘is what it is in the absence of its animating presence’ (2000:12). As recognised by Ferdinand de Saussure, these signs operate as semantic markers that stand in for the external concepts they signify. That is,

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2 See, for example, Barthes’s Camera Lucida (1980), and Derrida’s Memoires: for Paul de Man (1986).

3 See, for example, Julia Friedman’s ‘Cézanne and the poetics of metonymy’ (2007), and Roman Jakobson’s ‘Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances’ (1990).
there exists no intrinsic union between the word “tree” as a signifier and the concept of a tree as its signified, or, indeed, with the real tree itself, in the world, which exists externally to the sign as its referent. Words do not embody what they signify, but rather depend on their estrangement from the real presence of the signified in order to create the illusion of presence. Similarly, the signifier does not represent a pre-existing concept, but rather, a concept whose meaning depends on its relation to other words. As Saussure explains:

Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others (1959:114).

Speaking of the system by which meaning is produced by the interrelation of linguistic units, Saussure emphasised the relational and differential nature of meaning as produced by signs, and the operation of values in this system over ideas. That is, he asserts how in producing, exchanging and comprehending patterns of linguistic signs, speakers, writers, thinkers and listeners find not ‘pre-existing ideas’ but rather:

(...*) values emanating from the system. When they are said to correspond to concepts, it understood that the concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not (1959:117).

Saussure’s above assertion that linguistic concepts are ‘defined (...) negatively’, by ‘being what the others are not’ highlights the inescapably negational nature of language in the lexical and semantic rifts and absences by which the operations of its sign-system is structured. Nowhere is this negational structure of language more vividly elucidated than in the work of Blanchot. In his essay, ‘Literature and the Right to Death’ (1981), Blanchot discusses absence as being at once a phenomenon by which the experience of writing is structured, and by which meaning and literature is made possible through its animation of literary or, more specifically, poetic language. Blanchot’s conception of the negation at work within literary language must be understood in contrast to the functional
negativity that operates on the level of everyday language. In the case of everyday language, the interconnected linguistic structure of the signifier, signified and referent, or, as expounded by Haase and Large, ‘the word, the concept and the thing’ work to deliver meaning via the disappearance of the “thing”, the real-world object to which the concept refers in the material mark of the word (2001: 27). Literature thus emerges as the realisation and foregrounding of that which in ordinary language is bypassed in the relay of a message (or concept). That is, ‘it is not the message, but the medium that is important, and this medium can only be understood as that which resists, interrupts or suspends the message’ (Haase & Large, 2001:29). While, in everyday language, the delivery of the concept is achieved through the negation of not only its real-world referent but also of the material word that represents it, in literary language, ostensibly the referent and its concept are negated while the word itself is foregrounded. Accordingly, literary language, suggests Blanchot, ‘observes that the word cat is not only the nonexistence of the cat, but the nonexistence made word, that is, a completely determined and objective reality’ (1981:44).

That is, within the sphere of literature, words emerge as autonomous entities of intrinsic value beyond their everyday function of relaying meaning. Consider, for example, the radical strangeness of encountering familiar language transformed in poetry, where figures such as metaphor and metonymy create an entirely different frame of reference to that of literal language, most particularly in the movement of poetry to foreground the materiality of language and dislocate the delivery of its apparent signified, maximizing the distance between word and concept and the absence of the referent. As Steiner says, ‘[t]he truth of the word is the absence of the world’ (1991:96).

From the onset of modernism in the late nineteenth century in the West, can be traced an increasing awareness on the part of writers as diverse as Gertrude Stein and Stéphane Mallarmé, of the self-referential nature of language; the way in which words refer to other words, rather than to the world. As aphorised by Steiner, this shift in aesthetic consciousness under modernism entailed a fundamental ‘break’, ‘between word and world’ (1991:93). With this shift came a spirit of play and exploration, in which emerged a writing which foregrounded its own materiality and formal structures, reflecting back on its own processes in a
reflexive style which celebrated the power of abstraction and the primacy of words unmoored from their real-world referents. For Blanchot, this movement of literature to disrupt the everyday referentiality of language, constituting an “unmooring” between words and the world which is extant in ordinary language yet only truly “felt” in literature, is epitomised in the experimental poetry of Mallarmé. In Mallarmé, one can discern a testament to Derrida’s observation of the absence at the heart of the sign and its fundamental estrangement from its signified as being the very conditions by which it is animated⁴. Speaking of Mallarmé, Steiner discerns a revolutionary shift, that of modernism itself, which acknowledges that ‘non-reference constitutes the true genius and purity of language’ (1991:96). In Mallarmé, words are revealed in a strange freedom of reference that pronounces their aesthetic properties, through the assembly of heterogeneous phrases and images, at times breached by the blanks of the page, which don’t immediately “match up”, arising often as if by coincidence. Mallarmé’s famous long and typographically complex 1897 poem, Un Coup De Dés (A Throw of the Dice), exemplifies the potential of such devices to trouble or circumvent the meaning-circuit of the sign, prompting abstract associations and cognitive leaps, while drawing attention to the autonomous properties of words referring not to the world but to themselves and each other in the aesthetic freedom of a poem on a page. In this wild space, outside the frame of everyday utilitarian language, words range as if left to their own devices, and the possibilities for meaning itself seem unbounded. In this way, the negation that literature enacts exceeds the negation of everyday language in which the absence of the thing or referent is supplemented by the presence of the concept, and can thus be seen as operating via ‘a double absence’, an absence which literature calls

⁴ In the context of this discussion about textuality and the relations between literary signification and the physical world, it is pertinent to note Timothy Morton’s compelling consideration of the affinities between scientific understandings of ecological life and deconstructive understandings of text. Morton’s argument, in ‘Ecology as Text, Text as Ecology’ (2010), emphasises the analogous way in which the respective study of both ‘life forms’ and ‘texts’ is increasingly disputing the possibility of either being defined as ‘having’ a single, independent and lasting identity’ (2010:1). That is, Morton shows the study of life forms to resist logocentric categorisation in a manner corresponding to Derrida’s demonstration of the untotalisable nature of texts. Drawing on a wide range of references, from Darwin to the genome, Morton also underlines the difficulty of separating textuality from the physical environment, in view of their congruence and interrelation as phenomena. Despite being beyond the scope of this essay, the implications of Morton’s reading here stand at once to enrich and complicate discussions of the signifying (inter)relations between word and world.
us to experience and attend to, rather than circumvent (Haase & Large, 2001:30-31).

It is this particular quality of absence which lends literature its primacy and strangeness, as a dominion “outside” the order of ordinary social structures of language and law. The operation of this literary absence is also inherently supplementary, as something that at once adds and replaces. As I will discuss, the supplementary movement of this absence is both complicated and intensified when the absence in question is not that of (literary) language alone, but also of the writer’s own felt experience, in a corresponding relational structure galvanized by absence. In this case, it is the felt experience of absence personally felt by the writing subject, whose writing is mobilised by and directed toward that absence. In one way, this double movement constitutes the amplification and cross-indexation of what Blanchot calls ‘the torment of language’, whereby this torment ‘is what it lacks because of the necessity that it be the lack of precisely this’ (1981:45-6).

For Blanchot as for Mallarmé, the way in which, manifestly, ‘a cat is not a cat’, creates the possibility of literature; poetic meaning depends on negativity, on the condition of words being ‘torn apart by equivocation’, ‘falsified by misunderstanding’ and ‘imbued with emptiness’ which ‘is their very meaning’ (Blanchot, 1981:30-31). The ‘realm of the imaginary’ over which the writer presides is total, suggests Blanchot, and in fact:

(…) it is the world, grasped and realized in its entirety by the global negation of all the individual realities contained in it, by their disqualification, their absence, by the realization of that absence itself, which is how literary creation begins (1981:36, my emphasis).

Further, writing enacts the ‘illusion’ of primal, originary creation, ‘seeing and naming’ ‘each thing and each being’, ‘from the starting point of the absence of everything, that is, from nothing’ (Blanchot, 1981:36, emphasis in original). Literary language effects the presentation of its signifieds (or generates meaning) not ‘by causing whatever it portrays to be present, but by portraying it behind everything, as the meaning and the absence of this everything’ (Blanchot, 1981:37). This vital negativity in literature also encompasses death, that radical
event that incites writing in answer to its threat of nothingness. Referencing Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Blanchot suggests that literature is concerned with ‘that moment when “life endures death and maintains itself in it” in order to gain from death the possibility of speaking and the truth of speech’ (1981:41). In this way, literature can constitute a premonitory reckoning and encounter with the otherness of death, which in attending to the negation of life, speaks of life itself, of that which death imparts to life and by which life is necessarily defined, the very things that also give rise to literature, and afford its urgency and power. Blanchot illuminates the negational power of language in his example of the act of naming involved in enunciating the phrase, “‘This woman’”:

For me to be able to say, “This woman” I must somehow take her flesh and blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being, its nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost being—the very fact that it does not exist (1981:42).

Placing the problematic gender politics of this particular example to one side, Blanchot here proposes that the nature of language is to negate being in order to speak it, in order to make it “live” in its passage from the world into words. The act of naming is by its nature violent, Blanchot suggests, for in naming we necessarily negate the singularity of what we name, supplanting a particular, inimitable, irreplaceable real thing (*this* rose, *that* woman) to a rhetorical designation transferable to any number of other comparable things; we create an idea autonomous from the real, particular thing, a generality capable of infinite transferal. In this way, language can function to reduce and to totalise, and is implicated in the sphere of ethics. Expounding further the above example, Blanchot asserts that:

[W]hen I say “This woman”, real death has been announced and is already present in my language; my language means that this person, who is here right now, can be detached from herself, removed from her existence and her presence and suddenly plunged into a nothingness in which there is no existence or presence; my language essentially signifies the possibility of this destruction (…) (1981:43).
As such, Blanchot declares that ‘when I speak: death speaks in me’ (1981:43). In this way, the power of language to summon images and ideas hinges on the negation of the real things it refers to, on the distance and difference between words and the world that language depends upon and maintains as it speaks “what is” only by speaking “what is not”. As Mallarmé writes:

I say: A flower! And, out of the oblivion where my voice casts every contour, insofar as it is something other than the known bloom, there arises, musically, the very idea in its mellowness; in other words, what is absent from every bouquet (2007:210).

II.

Negation & metonymy in mourning & writing:

Barthes’s *Mourning Diary*

In correlation to these energising and animating operations of absence with respect to language and literary creation, however, is the notion that a writer’s own “felt absence” or emotional experience of loss (whether physical or symbolic) might be instrumental in propelling them to the act of writing. This potential of absence or loss to mobilise literature (and other forms of art) is powerfully explored in Julia Kristeva’s wide-ranging, and itself elegiac study, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1987), wherein Kristeva notes that ‘loss, bereavement and absence trigger the work of the imagination and nourish it permanently as much as they threaten it and spoil it’ (1989:9). Nowhere does this possibility of loss or absence-as-trigger for writing find more traction than in the elegy, that most ancient and enduring literary tradition of lamentation, in which the elegist turns to language to testify to the irremediable absence of a lost loved one. Of crucial significance here is the way in which the structure of writing, mirroring the situation of the subject grappling with an irremediable loss, has no recourse to its referent other than through the representational structures of
language; through linguistic signs and poetic figures such as metonymy and metaphor, the operations of which depend in different ways on their remove from tangible, real-world objects. As Watkin notes, ‘writing can never call up the mimetic, reflective or transparent powers of traditional representation because its referent is permanently absent’, an observation of especial relevance to elegy (2004: 8). This paradoxical relation between the materiality of a text of loss and its wellspring in absence, and the animation of literary language by effacing the referent, is central to elegy’s formal and affective power, and also to its inevitable failure to restore or redeem the absence to which it speaks.

That the real experience of absence on the part of a writer can also mobilise the act of writing is a truth resonating throughout Roland Barthes’s late works, all of which emanate from his mother’s death. Forming a kind of index to all these writings are the raw, fragmentary and private entries of *Mourning Diary*, begun on the day following his mother’s death in 1977. Nowhere is there to be traced a more nuanced or direct dialogue by a writer with himself on the experience of felt absence and its implications for writing. In it, like any mourner, Barthes implores the universe, wrings his hands, wracks his brain, finds himself in disbelief at an event, a death, both inevitable and irredeemable—and confronts the spectre of his own death, at once the living death borne by the eradication of life’s meaning, and the real death awaiting us all. He questions the viability of his ongoing life and work. In the desolation of felt absence, although riddled with doubt about the viability of ‘making literature out of it’ (Barthes, 2012:23), Barthes reinvests in writing as a means of being able to justify and to bear going on living in his mother’s absence, describing writing in almost religious terms as his only hope of redemption:

Confusion, defection, apathy: only, in snatches, the image of writing as “something desirable,” haven, “salvation,” hope, in short “love,” joy. I imagine a sincerely devout woman has the same impulses toward her “God” (Barthes, 2012:59).

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Capturing everything from the sensory minutiae of a bakery transaction to instances in which he is reduced to tears, each entry in *Mourning Diary* is permeated by the memory of his mother’s presence and the persistent feeling of her absence; by the question of what is to be made now of life without her:

February 12, 1978

Snow, a real snowstorm over Paris; strange.

I tell myself, and suffer for it: she will never again be here to see it, or for me to describe it for her (2012:93).

This ‘questioning of torment’ (Richard Howard’s phrase) recorded by Barthes in *Mourning Diary* constantly returns to the subject of writing, and the possibility that his loss might finally yield to a redemptive great work, dreamed of as an apotheosis on the levels of both life and literature, converging around the idealised figure of his mother (Howard, 2012:259-60). Barthes called this project “Vita Nova” after Dante’s 13th century poetic narrative of love and longing for his beloved Beatrice. Concurrently, Barthes considers the ethics of thus redeeming or transforming through art the radical event of the death of one as sacred and singular as his mother. Even as he articulates his misgivings over such an intention or act, Barthes self-consciously detects his critical and creative faculties conspiring toward this end, and in this movement recognises himself as retaining desire and lust for life and the pleasures of his work in a manner unchanged from before, as if his being were not sufficiently altered by his being condemned to now live forever in his mother’s absence. Says Barthes of his mother’s death:

I don’t want to talk about it, for fear of making literature out of it—or without being sure of not doing so—although as a matter of fact literature originates within these truths (2012:23).

Despite this self-professed fear, Barthes, in *Mourning Diary*, routinely discusses the effects of his mother’s death on his emotions and on his thoughts with an explorer’s inquisitive eye, a writer’s eye. The entries of *Mourning Diary* ceaselessly affirm his instinct and desire to “make literature” out of his mother’s death, and work through the implications of this event for his future writing. Ultimately, *Mourning Diary* reads as a notation of evolving thought, an effort
toward transmuting the confounding absence of a beloved into a meaningful, and to some degree, consolatory, work. Three passages (among many) reveal the extent to which the question of writing was implicated in the experience of grappling with his mother’s absence:

Always (painfully) surprised to be able—finally—to live with my suffering (…)
But—no doubt—this is because I can, more or less (…) utter it, put it into words.
My culture, my taste for writing gives me this apotropaic or integrative power: I integrate, by language (2012:175).

(…) writing transforms for me the various “stases” of affect, dialectizes my “crises” (2012:105).

Depression comes when, in the depths of despair, I cannot manage to save myself by my attachment to writing (2012:62).

For Barthes in the grip of mourning, writing is thus conceived of as a potentially transformative medium, a vehicle by which to render the loss and absence of his mother bearable through the absorption of activity and the redemptive quest for meaning in the face of death’s despair. To write is to access the “integrative power” of language, of poetic signification, in loss and absence. This correlation of writing with redemption and positive transformation is echoed in the supposition: ‘no doubt I will be unwell, until I write something having to do with her’ (Barthes, 2012:216, my emphasis). Instinctively and in desperation, Barthes at once searched for a means of justifying daily existence without his mother, while searching also for a new way of writing that would attest to an altered world. His answer to this two-sided question was one and the same: in the vision of “Vita Nova” that was planned but never completed, and in the constellation of other writings, including *Camera Lucida* (1980), which were completed during his mourning.

Barthes’s compulsion to write about absence in spite of the impossibility of signifying the other, an enterprise that exhausts itself in realising a failure that is from the outset guaranteed, is the compulsion of every elegist. The radical experience of loss and felt absence begs even non-writers to rise to the impossible
challenge of trying to “make sense”, or at least attest to its enormity, in language—the otherness and unknowability which divides us from death and makes it so confounding is at once why it exceeds our ability to signify it, and why we desperately try anyway. For the professional writer this challenge is intensified. Their habitual activity and vocation is intrinsically implicated in what is foremost a personal crisis. For one who, like Barthes, in a great sense lives in order to write, the radical occasion of loss in the sphere of private life and the reckoning with felt absence which loss entails is a transformative experience of encountering the other and the very negation by which language is structured and animated. The reckoning with loss is also a reckoning with the limits of language.

Blanchot ultimately suggests that the redemption of literary negation lies in the materiality of poetic language itself. Speaking of the melancholy power of literary language to summon the exquisite particularity of a single flower only by effecting that real flower’s disappearance and maintaining its infinite distance (echoing Mallarmé), Blanchot at once exults and laments, for at such distance to real presence, ‘what hope do I have of attaining the thing I push away?’ (1981:46). His answer lies in the supplementary presence of language itself, in its materiality, its tangible, sensuous form as a ‘thing’, celebrated in the rhythm and rhyme of poetry, or as beheld in the shapes of letters on the page. The wonder and ‘obscure power’ of the word is ‘as an incantation that coerces things, makes them really present outside of themselves’ (1981:46, emphasis in original).

This absence by which literary language is given life is amplified in the literature of loss, in writing whose subject is also absence. Within this frame, the materiality of literary language, of words in themselves, is thrown into greater relief when what those words refer to is a referent already absent in the world, even before it is negated in language. When Roland Barthes turns to language to speak of his dead mother, we feel the poverty of that language, its inability to “speak her”, but also its unlikely power of summons, the “glimmer” of his mother’s truth, the presence of her absence, under the weight of Barthes’s grief and effort to recover her in words. Such literary efforts to signify loss and absence gain in affective intensity via the foregrounding of language under pressure to signify, when the singular absence each word strains toward is exactly what disappears in their movement.

In this way, the process of writing felt absence can be conceived as passing
through an additional movement of negation, analogous to that of the linguistic sign (see figure below). In the movement of literary signification, a signifier/word is foregrounded via the negation of both its signified/concept and referent. In the movement of signifying felt absence, the writing subject works to signify the absence of the referent/lost other via the objects in the world around them that remain present.

**Figure 3:** Operational structure of linguistic sign (above), in relation to experiential movement of writing “felt absence” (below).
In considering the mobilising potential of absence in the activity of writing, it is worth attending briefly to Derrida’s discussion of supplementarity in *Of Grammatology* (1967). Conducted as a deconstructive reading of the contradictory assumptions held by Jean-Jacques Rousseau regarding speech in relation to writing, this discussion is most relevant here for its illumination of Rousseau as a writer consumed by the possibility that writing poses for ‘the restoration, by a certain absence and by a sort of calculated effacement, of presence disappointed of itself in speech’ (Derrida, 1997:142). In this reading of Rousseau, we glimpse an instance of the paradoxical interrelation of absence and presence that operates in language being encompassed in a writer’s own motivation to write.

Derrida describes Rousseau as caught between the uncontainable nature of speech, which in its immediacy at once promises ideal presence and withdraws it, and writing as an ‘unnatural’ method of violence to this promised presence which yet offers recourse to its incomplete salvage. He describes Rousseau as resigning himself to the compensatory operations of writing, as a removed and imperfect recapture, mediated by absence. In this way, writing serves a ‘supplementary’ function. As Derrida posits, the supplement is in fact a contradictory phenomenon that, rather than adding itself to and enriching an existing presence, in fact ‘adds only to replace’; it fills at a remove only that which cannot be filled, and ‘its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness’ (1997:145). Language, and in particular writing, with its code of signs ‘standing in’ for their referents, is inherently supplementary. In Derrida’s words, ‘The sign is always the supplement of the thing itself’ (1997:145).

As Derrida shows, the seduction of the supplement for Rousseau extends beyond writing to become the seduction of any sign, representation or symbolic presence that stands in for and appears to promise a real presence in the world. In this way, Rousseau’s notorious attachment to masturbation emerges as a corollary to writing, through which the immediate experience of presence (intercourse with a living woman) is threatened and possibly exceeded by its supplement, the secondary simulation of intercourse in auto-eroticism. Later, Derrida quotes
Rousseau (1782) describing his desperate love for his mother, affirming the paradoxical relation of presence to absence in the statement, “I only felt the full strength of my attachment when I no longer saw her” (1997:152). As Derrida highlights, it is only ‘when the mother disappears that substitution becomes possible and necessary’ (1997:152-3). Ultimately, Derrida suggests, supplementarity operates as ‘an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence’ (1997:157). God, Logos, origin—all those entities of ‘absolute presence’, urges Derrida, are non-existent, and ‘what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence’ (1997:159). In this way, writings of “felt absence” can be seen as perpetuating the negations by which they are structured. For Rousseau, the act of writing appears to have indeed been mobilised by his own complex experience of absence, serving to supplement and, at times, to paradoxically exceed the experience of presence.

The metonymy of loss

In conceiving of this analogous movement, I have drawn from William Watkin’s application of psychoanalyst John Bowlby’s work on grief and loss (referred to by Watkin as an “environmental model” of loss), in view of elegiac literature. Building upon the object relations theory of Freud and Melanie Klein, John Bowlby’s understanding of loss, broadly termed “attachment theory”, is explained by Bowlby as pertaining to ‘[a]ttachment behaviour [which] is conceived as any form of behaviour that results in a person attaining or retaining proximity to some other differentiated and preferred individual’ (1980:39). Further, more than previous theorists, Bowlby emphasises the fundamental importance of what he describes as ‘a mourner’s urge to act—to call for and to search for the lost person’, an urge that leads the mourner to ‘engag[e] in those very acts, fragmented and incomplete though they may be’ (1980:28). Moreover, Bowlby contends that the strength of human attachment is such that, while at times, in mourning, ‘the effort to restore the bond’ might ‘wan[e]’, ‘usually it does not cease’ (1980:42). In the words of a widow cited by Bowlby, ‘[m]ourning never ends: only as time goes
In discussing studies on the bereavement experiences of widows and widowers, Bowlby notes that ‘half or more (...) reach a state of mind in which they retain a strong sense of the continuing presence of their partner’ (1980:96). Bowlby notes that, while such a sense of the lost one’s presence might also be experienced through dreams, or through the mourner’s performing of activities linked to their memory of the deceased, frequently, in the experiences of the subjects of these studies:

(...) the [deceased] spouse is experienced as located somewhere specific and appropriate. Common examples are a particular chair or room which he occupied, or perhaps the garden, or the grave’ (1980:98).

In this way, Bowlby’s attachment theory stresses the relation of the subject of loss to diverse objects present within their environment, rather than to the lost object alone, ‘an environment of subjective presence but also of objective loss’ (Watkin, 2004:186). That is, for Bowlby, loss is experienced through the subject’s diverse relations with objects around them, through which the subject retains proximity to the object that has been lost (Watkin, 2004:187). This relational structure allows for the mediation of loss and the radical otherness of absence by the subject via their metonymic interaction with objects or ‘things’, “parts” that “stand in” for the unfathomable totality of loss, circumventing the alterity of absence and the difficulty of facing it “head-on” (Watkin, 2004:186).

In applying the principles of Bowlby’s attachment theory to select examples from the literature of loss, Watkin offers insight into the diverse elegiac structures at work within such texts and outlines a means by which to both identify ethical modes of writing about the other, and to conduct ethical readings of such texts. Analysing novels by Ian McEwan, Douglas Copeland and Dave Eggers, Watkin observes that:

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While in this essay I have generally preferred the term “lost other” over “lost object” (due to the latter’s tendency to diminish the agency of the lost being or entity), in this section I invoke the latter psychoanalytic term for consistency while discussing the work of Watkin and Bowlby.
(…) loss does not happen in a dialectic scene between subject and object in an artificial pastoral realm, but is what happens dynamically between subjects, other subjects, lost object and present object in a living, metonymic environment of proximity and distance (2004:177).

Approaching loss through the intermediary of objects that metonymically figure as partial to the overwhelming “whole” of absence is at once necessary and problematic. On the one hand, doing so risks reducing the lost other to a collection of phenomena left behind (be they inanimate things or the thoughts, memories and emotions of the living) which in reality do not and cannot represent them, denying their alterity and agency while being lured ourselves into false emotional investments in objects which cannot and should not provide us with the certainties we desire. On the other hand, how can we avoid conceiving of such an unquantifiable and confounding an experience as loss, and its attendant absence, in relation to the physical phenomena of our everyday world and the phenomena of our own minds and emotions? For these are the very things by which our lived experience is structured, constituting the environment in which we also experience loss. As Watkin suggests:

(…) to speak of the proximate of loss—the closeness of the corpse, the unknowability of the other, the rent fabric of the environment—is to speak of the everyday world of things (2004:176).

Moreover, Watkin pointedly asserts that ‘metonymy refers to the proximity of things to things, or signs to signs, not of signs to things’ (2004:191). As such, metonymy is a relational structure comparable to that of literary language, in which words ultimately refer to other words, rather than to their referents in the world. In this way, both structures are mediated and animated by the absence of an external referent—the real thing to which a word refers, or the lost other of which the elegy speaks.

In his efforts to express the experience of his mother’s absence in words, Barthes also turned to objects, the inescapable everyday world of things around him that remain behind after loss. His reflections in Mourning Diary are cross-indexed by wide-ranging references to his own books and those of Proust (157),
Dante (74), a story by Tolstoy (209); to Biblical verse; the music of Souzay (47); an interaction at a bakery store (37); a cocktail party (214); the family house at Urt (20); the weather in Paris (93); photographs (143); the state of his apartment (35); a film which mentions a ‘rice-powder box’ that evokes his childhood with his mother (112); a ‘dreary’ coat and scarf ensemble that his mother would not approve of (99); swallows in flight (159); his mother’s ‘pink Uniprix nightgown’ (34); her grave site (241); a dream in which he sees her smile (243); Cézanne’s watercolours (134); a trip to Tunisia (58); conversations with friends (71). In the absence of his mother, everything surrounding Barthes, his “metonymic environment”, seems to speak of her, emphasising the ways in which he himself and the world are now diminished without her. The stupefying materiality of the world is foregrounded in the absence of his mother, the testamentary weight of objects by turns imbued with pathos or indifference, signifiers displaced from concept and thing, parts displaced from the whole. Such objects signify only the absence of his mother and the impossibility of signifying her presence, just as in literary language the referent and its concept are negated while the word itself is foregrounded. In this sense, Barthes’s work of writing his mourning involved translating one kind of signifier into another.

The effort of expressing in language a deeply felt sense of loss throws into strange relief Blanchot’s observation that, ‘when I speak, I recognize very well that there is speech only because “what is” has disappeared in what names it’ (1993:36). The desire to recover absence in writing is always an enactment of failure, when the presence we long to recover in language is just what we negate in writing it. In the absence of Barthes’s mother, the material weight of not only the world and its objects, but the words that refer to it, are magnified:

*August 18, 1978*

The locality of the room where she was sick, where she died, and where I now live, the wall against which the head of her bed rested where I have placed an icon—not out of faith—and still put flowers on a table next to it. I have reached the point of no longer wanting to travel in order to be here, so that the flowers here will always be fresh. (Barthes, 2012:191).
Yet, as writers like Barthes show us, the effort to write of the difficult persistence of felt absence in our lives can yield to literature of power and value, which in failing to reach the referent, testify to:

(... the eternal torment of our language when its longing turns back toward what it always misses, through the necessity under which it labors of being the lack of what it would say (Blanchot, 1993:36).

III.

Ethics & the Orphic turn

From the operations of literary language as a structure, to the mobilisation of writing as a felt process, to the real experience of loss and mourning—the movements that converge in elegy hinge upon negation and metonymy. Moreover, elegy itself enacts a movement additional to those inscribed within it, a movement allegorised in the Orphic (or elegiac) turn. In this turn is crystallised the question of what we, as writers and mourners, owe to the one we mourn in elegy, the question of elegiac ethics.

In Freudian subject-centred models of mourning, as seen replicated in traditional elegy, the work of overcoming loss is predicated upon the subject’s introspection upon the lost other and the nature of their loss, in anticipation of commemoration as a means of consolation and preservation, before “turning” from the lost other in order to speak of them. This turn is a movement by which the subject overcomes loss while interiorising the lost other, compromising the lost being’s agency and, through the movement of the elegy, enacting losing the lost being for a second time, thus, in a sense, as Watkin suggests, losing loss itself (187). This turn, which in negating or sacrificing the lost other mobilises the mourner to speak of them and master their grief, underwrites the elegiac tradition, and is epitomised in the ancient Greek myth of the death of Eurydice. In this myth, Orpheus, upon finding the dead body of his wife Eurydice and being
overcome by grief, is moved to make such beautiful music in lamenting her death that he impels the gods Hades and Persephone to allow him to take Eurydice from the underworld back to earth with him. This is granted on the condition that Orpheus remain in front of Eurydice, and not look back at her, until reaching earth. However, during their ascent from the underworld, Orpheus is at the last moment unable to resist looking back, thus forfeiting his wife forever. In *The Space of Literature* (1982), Blanchot suggests that Orpheus had to look back because he:

(...) does not want Eurydice in her daytime truth and her everyday appeal, but wants her in her nocturnal obscurity, in her distance, with a closed body and sealed face—wants to see her not when she is visible, but when she is invisible...not to make her live, but to have her living in the plenitude of her death (1982:172).

Despite the troubling implications of Blanchot’s persistent equations, here and elsewhere, of Eurydice with familiar tropes of the woman as other and as muse for the purposes of male creativity, his reading of the myth here speaks incisively to the operations of elegy with which this discussion is concerned. That is, Blanchot underscores here the way in which Orpheus’s song depends on the infinite distance, and absence, of the one of whom he sings. Blanchot’s reading, if unapologetically, also frames Orpheus’s forsaking turn back toward Eurydice clearly within the context of his conscious artistic desire ‘to have her’ in the darkness, mystery and otherness of ‘her death’, and within the context of what Orpheus’s art demands (Blanchot, 1982:172). As Blanchot suggests, ‘[Orpheus’s] desire, and Eurydice lost...are necessary to the song (1981:101). By contrast, Orpheus’s turning back, so fatal to Eurydice, is often framed in a more forgiving or opaque light, for example in the context of his being a ‘lover, / Fearing for his partner and eager to see her’, as in Stanley Lombardo’s translation of Ovid’s account (2011:129). Blanchot’s reading of Orpheus’s turn back as a movement of desire to seize absence for the ends of art, which for the analogical purposes of this essay is followed herein, is compelling to frame in light of Hilda Doolittle’s

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7 The earliest recorded versions of the myth are found in in Book IV of Virgil’s *Georgics* (29 BC) and in Book X of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (8 AD).
modernist rewriting of the myth from the viewpoint of Eurydice, in her poem ‘Eurydice’ (1916), which imbues the latter with a sense of agency and a demand to be answered which is lacking in traditional accounts of the myth. Doolittle’s Eurydice, as speaker, is fiercely alive to having been sacrificed by Orpheus in his turn back, and (unlike in many versions of the myth) is unforgiving, calling for Orpheus to answer for his actions: ‘why did you turn back, / that hell should be re-inhabited / of myself thus/swept into nothingness? (...) what was it you saw in my face? / the light of your own face, / the fire of your own presence?’ (1983:52).

For the purposes of this essay, it is important to understand that Orpheus, as a mourner and elegist, conceivably also makes a second, less famous turn—the turn away from Eurydice when she is already lost, which relinquishes her to a second death in the same moment in which Orpheus experiences a second loss. This turn of the mourner away from the lost other, and toward their own interiority and the living world around them in order to mourn this lost other, remember them, and sing, paint, or write their absence in a form that derives its power from that very absence, is a movement that haunts commemorative art. Orpheus’s treatment of Eurydice’s death exists not only as a symbol of male creativity being mobilised at the expense of female agency, but an allegory for the sublimation of any other in the movement of elegiac art.

It must be noted that Watkin, in his discussion of Orpheus, rather confusingly omits significant discussion of the crucial original turn toward Eurydice whereby, by force of his desire to see her prematurely (before reaching the upper world), he condemns her to a second death. Instead, Watkin discusses the Orphic-elegiac movement as comprising of the abovementioned turn away from Eurydice, and also of a consequent ‘turn back’ or ‘re-turn’ to Eurydice (2004:189). As Watkin explains, this dual movement involves the subject’s ‘turn[ing] away from the object as a real thing’ and then ‘turn[ing] to the object as something for the reality of the subject’ (2004:190). Thus, the subject not only turns from the object as a discrete other, but turns back, to reappraise the world and their place in it in light

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8 In Beyond consolation: death, sexuality, and the changing shapes of elegy (1997), Melissa F. Zeiger conducts an insightful examination of the changing representations of gender and sexuality in elegy, including the diverse responses of modern female elegists (such as Doolittle) to historical representations of Eurydice by male elegists.
of what has been lost, assimilating the object within their own subjectivity (Watkin, 2004:190). In this way, Watkin extends the allegory of the Orphic turn to encompass three turns: toward, away from, and back toward Eurydice. In this essay, however, I have not followed Watkin in the unnecessarily confusing analogy of a third “turn back” toward Eurydice, a phrase and image which to my mind more readily suggest Orpheus answering to his ethical responsibility to Eurydice than they suggest his assimilation of her as a part of himself, a process which in my analogy occurs during the second turn. Rather, in the later chapters of this essay, the prospect of Orpheus “resisting turning away” and of “turning toward” or “back to” Eurydice represents the promise of an Orpheus who, as a mourner, resists forsaking Eurydice in her death, and answers to her gaze, even (or especially) when she is absent. That is, such movements will be invoked herein as analogies for thinking ethical mourning in the context of eco-elegy, in which we face and are answerable to the other in their alterity, as will be further contextualised in light of Derrida’s mourning theory in Chapter 4.

Regardless of the vaguely confusing nature of his treatment of Orpheus’s turns, Watkin offers an insightful consideration of the implications of Bowlby’s work for elegy. Watkin figures the difference between the Orphic “turn away” of the mourner-elegist in the traditional subject-object model of mourning, and the structure of the Bowlbyan environmental model, as being between metaphor and metonymy. In the first model, the subject must ‘memorise the scene of their love for the thing, because when the scene is interrupted, as it always will be, it will be their job alone to memorialise its loss’ (Watkin, 2004:187). Like Orpheus, suggests Watkin, the mourner-elegist turns from the object, ‘and by interiorising turn[s] the object away from its objectal status’, appropriating it within their own subjectivity (2004:187;189). This movement whereby the subject effectively negates the alterity of the object as other is that of introjection, an integral step in Freud’s process of “healthy” mourning for the subject to recover from loss. As Watkin explains, the work of Bowlby reframes the mourning ‘scene of metaphor’ as instead ‘an environment of metonyms’, a shift from metaphorical distance from loss to metonymical proximity to loss (2004:190). Watkin further notes that this shift was foreshadowed by Lacan’s ‘conception of metonymy as the movement from word-to-word, rather than word-to-thing, that typifies desire’, whereby:
in the network of signifiers the real thing is always sliding under the bar of signification. Each sign, therefore, brings us closer to, and further defers, the truth. The Lacanian subject, the metonymic subject, is the subject formed from the problems of the proximity of lack, perceived of as a loss (2004:190).

In diverging from Freud’s ‘dialectic, inter-subjective scene’, and instead situating loss within an environment contingent upon the proximity of the lost other, rather than simply upon the subject’s presence and the other’s absence, Bowlby’s theory is ethical, suggests Watkin (2004:187). Bowlby’s establishment of attachment as “any form of behaviour that results in a person attaining or retaining proximity to some other differentiated and preferred individual” (Bowlby, 1980:29), leads Watkin to outline several implications for critics and readers of literature in identifying and engaging with ethical representations of loss (2004:191). Hence Watkin emphasises that ‘ethical mourning’ involves a relation not between ‘subject-object but subject-object-other’, and not ‘a metonymic scene but a metonymic environment’ (2004:191). In addition, he stresses that ‘metonymy refers to the proximity of things to things, or signs to signs, not of signs to things’ (2004:191). Finally, ‘the environment is a place where the subject maintains proximity to a number of favoured love objects’ (2004:191). For these reasons, ‘the critic must pay special attention to the environments of loss’ (2004:191). In doing so, we are caused to attend to the alterity of the other as in fact ‘never having been possessed and so demanding of responsibility’ (2004:191). Ultimately, Watkin asserts that:

(...) reading works of mourning should be a detailed process of reading proximity, in particular looking for those moments when proximity is troped out, the gaps between things smeared over to fake a continuum (...) reading literature of loss should be the activity of considering the proximity to otherness encountered in an environment (2004:191, emphasis mine).

While Watkin, here as elsewhere, speaks to the implications of ethical mourning to literary criticism, his observations regarding the importance of attending to the proximity of otherness are vital not only to the activity of reading, but also of writing loss. The Orphic turn, and turn back, at once denies and totalises the
alterity of the lost other, reconstituting them as merely an object in relation to the subject’s own reality, rather than as ‘a real thing’ in itself (Watkin, 2004:190). By contrast, Bowlby’s figuration of mourning as a relation to multiple objects within a mourner’s environment constitutes a movement whereby, rather than objectifying the lost other, ‘the subject simply turns from one object of attachment to another’ (Watkin, 2004:194). Watkin likens this process to one in which ‘one stop-gap [is] inserted into another until the gap becomes all one has’ (2004:195).

In this model as in Freud’s, the process of mourning ultimately centres on the subject, who endlessly reconfigures their relation to the lost other through their relation to other objects around them. Bowlby’s model, however, at least emphasises the ongoing proximity of the other in the mourner’s experience, even in absence, instead of smearing over the space that separates mourner from mourned (Watkin, 2004:195). Watkin illuminates the difference between these modes of relating to the lost other by contrasting the movements of metaphor and metonymy in reference to Freud’s account of his nephew’s *fort-da* game of playing ‘gone’ with an object. Conceiving of this game as a form of mourning practice, Watkin emphasises the fact that the child’s exclamation is not ‘gone-here’ (*fort-hier*), but ‘gone-there’ (*fort-da*), suggesting that rather than being an enactment of “disappearance and return” as Freud suggests, it is in fact one of ‘deixis and distancing’ (2004:164). As such, Watkin observes these movements as constituting a distinction between ‘inter-subjective metaphor’ and ‘environmental metonymy’ (2004:165). Metaphor ‘requires a significant distance between subject and object so as to justify relocating the object tropically within the subject’ (Watkin, 2004:165), a movement enacted in traditional Freudian elegies but posing an inadequate model for figuring loss. By contrast, metonymy, as a relation between the ‘proximate but separate’ corresponds to the way in which death (or absence) is also strangely ‘proximate but separate’ from us as mourning subjects existing in relation to other objects within environments which are themselves altered by the absence of the other (Watkin, 2004:165). Watkin’s conception of metonymy as a structure encompassing a relation of both ‘proximity’ and ‘separateness’ to the other could also be considered in terms of intimacy and distance, or difference.

Importantly, the implication of such a metonymic structure in thinking about
ethical mourning in elegy (as in life), is mirrored on the level of elegiac writing as an act of signification, and on the level of language itself. Each of these movements, converging in elegy, are structured by a metonymic relation to an absent or negated referent—be it the lost other in real-life mourning, the lost other in writing elegy, or the real thing in the world to which a word refers. Elegy’s enactment of negation upon negation in foregrounding its own materiality and affective power as literature speaks to the ethical importance, highlighted by Watkin, of at once retaining proximity to the other we elegise, while preserving their distance and alterity as an other who is absent. In writing elegy, it is incumbent on us to recognise that, just as the experience of loss might mobilise us to write, so do we self-consciously mobilise the narrative and aesthetic powers of loss for our own literary ends. Speaking of this paradoxical productivity of loss in the lives of writers in Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing (1993), Hélène Cixous boldly acknowledges how, as writers, ‘in losing we have something to gain. Mixed loss and gain: that’s our crime’ (1993:11). Here, Cixous relates these paradoxical ‘gains’ of loss to her own experience, explaining that ‘The first book I wrote rose from my father’s tomb’ (1993:11). In speaking of the aesthetic and ethical implications of generative death (which we can relate more generally to absence), Cixous suggests that while we can perpetuate a kind of secondary killing through writing, ‘we can also…be the guardian, the friend, the regenerator of the dead’ (1993:13). Considering the way in which writing about death encompasses an ethical struggle ‘not to kill, knowing there is death, not denying it and not proclaiming it’, Cixous, like Blanchot, is mindful of the subtleties in grammar which can implicate us in the act of denying the other’s agency (1993:13). Cixous suggests that simply attaching the possessive pronoun “my” to a subject such as ‘daughter’ or ‘brother’ constitutes ‘verging on a form of murder, as soon as I forget to unceasingly recognize the other’s difference’ (1993:13). We are mistaken in believing ourselves to truly ‘know’ even those we have known all our lives, asserts Cixous in a sentiment echoed by other poststructuralists such as Derrida. For Cixous, we writers and the dead are caught in a circular bind: ‘You kept him or her in the realm of the dead. And the other way around’ (1993:13). The negation of the other that writers collude in when writing, and the paradoxical way in which writing involves ‘departing while remaining present, (…) being absent while in full presence’, is likened by Cixous to a form of violence not only
to the other by the writer or to the writer by the other, but of the writer by writing itself (1993:21). Ultimately, says Cixous, in discussing Poe’s story of the painter who, in finally realizing his artistic ideal, loses its object in a terrifying (and Orphic) eclipse of life and art:

What we are made to understand is that there can’t be life on both sides. (…) we cannot create in a just manner. In creation we find ourselves before the inevitable failure. It’s a double bind: either you don’t render life or you take it. (1993:31).

In this discussion, Cixous offers an understanding of writing as a paradoxical act of creation and violence, which demands the writer be answerable to its stakes. On the level of language and narrative, writing makes vulnerable not only the other’s alterity, but the writer’s interiority. In answering ethically to the stakes of writing, suggests Cixous, the writer must at once acknowledge the violent, perhaps unavoidable potential of writing to totalize and reduce the other it represents (and which itself “gives life” to writing), and to manoeuvre in ways that limit this violence. Recognising the other’s difference through the preservation of a certain distance within writing offers one means of doing this. Cixous’s observations regarding the relation of writing to death, the strangely germinative effect that bereavement can institute in writers, and the “taking of life” which artistic creation entails, are applicable not only to writing of death, but also to writing springing from the experience of absence which arises from less-finite forms of loss. Ultimately, Cixous defines writing as ‘the delicate, difficult, and dangerous means of succeeding in avowing the unavowable’ (1993:53). For Cixous, the violence to the other that writing perpetrates when it expends itself in search of the truth, in the aim of ‘avowing the unavowable’, is a difficult and unavoidable fact of the creative act (1993:32). Moreover, it is a violence directed not only upon the other but also upon the writer themselves, upon the other within us—‘when we kill a dead person, we kill ourselves’ (Cixous, 1993:13).

Cixous’s understanding of writing as a paradox of ‘succeeding in avowing the unavowable’ is echoed by Blanchot in *Death Sentence* (1978), when the narrator reflects upon his telling of the story, explaining that ‘[o]ne thing must be understood: I have said nothing extraordinary or even surprising. What is extraordinary begins at the moment I stop. But I am no longer able to speak of it’
Here, Blanchot’s narrator speaks to the strange way in which it is through the failure of language and literature to manifest the real, in its negating of the other and in its being negated by that other, that it paradoxically verges toward truth, toward presence, and toward the other. As Marguerite Duras articulates, writing involves ‘the telling of a story, and the absence of the story’ (1991:27). This understanding speaks directly to the way that not only literary language, but elegy as a form performs its own failure to say the unsayable, while somehow still leaving something behind that attests to the truth of presence-in-absence. In addressing this paradox, Watkin invokes Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s concept of the “singable residue”, a phrase appropriated from Paul Celan. Analysing Celan’s poem, ‘Tubingen, January’, Lacoue-Labarthe speaks of poetry as having ‘nothing to recount, nothing to say; what it recounts and says is that from which it wrenches away as a poem’ (1999:20). ‘A poem’, Lacoue-Labarthe contends:

(…) is nothing but pure wanting-to-say. But pure wanting-to-say nothing, nothingness, that against which and through which there is presence, what is (1999:20).

Ultimately, he posits:

(…) the question…of the singbarer Rest, the singable residue: what saves this poem from wreckage in, and the wreckage of, poetry? How does it happen that in poetry, out of poetry, all is not lost, that a possibility of articulating something still remains…? (1999:23, emphasis in original).

In the singable residue, Lacoue-Labarthe articulates the paradox of generative negation that sustains and supplements the elegy. This residue is what remains in excess of our ability in language to testify to the other’s absence in language, an excess which Watkin suggests ‘does not describe the importance of language for mourning, but the importance of mourning for language’ (2004:14). To cite Steiner, ‘[t]here is always, as Blake taught, “excess” of the signified beyond the signifier’ (1991:84). Elegy is a form mobilised and foregrounded by absences in language and the world that its movement further negate (not least through the
use of tropes), in verging upon saying the unsayable at the very moment in which ‘it wrenches away’. These absences are those of the real things or beings to which the word, and the mourner lamenting loss, refer.

The question of elegiac ethics pertains to what we, in enacting such a movement of writing, owe to the other whose loss we recall, and whose absence we negate, for a second time in literature. Further, how do we answer in writing to this responsibility? As this essay will further discuss, this question has received sustained attention, through the reflections of writers themselves, within elegy and mourning studies and within the wider philosophy of ethics. Questions that demand increased attention, however, relate to the ethics and poetics of reckoning in elegy with the phenomenon of ecological loss. What do we do when the absence and loss we speak of is the environment itself? How do we account for such loss in words? And how do we mourn in elegy for something that is not “fully” lost? Specifically, how might we as writers approach eco-elegy, and define eco-loss, in light of the ethical dangers involved in applying the elegiac mode to the literary representation of ecological devastation? In addressing this question, the following chapter will discuss the paradoxes involved in defining eco-loss, arguing for the need to rethink the signifier “loss” in view of eco-elegy.
2
Elegy under pressure: ecological loss

Our morality is complicated by the fact that the sky above even the most demonic folly is often exquisitely colored, and its clouds as breathtakingly pure.

― Rachel Solnit, Savage Dreams

(... what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both.

― Edward Said, ‘Reflections on Exile’

Just as absence mobilises the linguistic sign, so does felt absence mobilise writers to write, and so do writers self-consciously mobilise the narrative and aesthetic powers of this absence for their own literary ends. Writers “put absence to work” and in doing so, face a myriad of formal and ethical conundrums concentrated in the project of representing a lost other in literary language. These conundrums are infinitely complicated when the absence of which they are writing stems from ecological loss.

This chapter reflects on my own experience of visiting the Ukrainian part of the Exclusion Zone created after the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster, as research for The Counterpart, before interrogating the meaning of the signifier “loss” in relation to “nature” and ecological destruction, and examining the paradoxical and

9 For a selection of photographs suggestive of the “metonymic objects” present throughout the Zone (as discussed in this chapter), see the Appendix.
ethically problematic form of the ecological elegy. Finally, it will briefly discuss the literary form of the ecological elegy with reference to Timothy Morton’s essay ‘The Dark Ecology of Elegy’ (2010), arguing that a more rigorous attendance to the varied meanings encompassed by the word “loss” is integral to developing an ethical poetics of eco-elegy.

Writing Chernobyl

During the course of research for The Counterpart, I visited Ukraine’s Exclusion Zone, or Zone of Alienation, the 4300 square kilometre area, spanning three countries, that was evacuated of humans following the 1986 nuclear accident at Chernobyl power plant, the worst nuclear disaster in history. Taking a bus from Kiev’s Independence Square for two hours through suburban sprawl, straggling villages and woodland, to the Exclusion Zone that had for so long occupied my thoughts, was a strange journey. To finally “be there” was a surreal feeling, as if my being able to reach that place was a violation of the order of things that stipulates that certain regions should always remain beyond the reach of those who would visit them (certainly, regarding certain modes of “dark tourism”, there are grounds for such an argument—I remain ambivalent about the nature of my visit).

It was as if, in simply being there, I had entered otherness itself, and I felt that Conradian thrill which commingles aesthetic distance with the awe of the real. In this, of course, I was guilty of a dangerous kind of metaphysical thinking, the kind that romanticises reality and, in doing so, undermines atrocity, as well as the singularity of the beings in its web. Like much of the world, I had mythologised as other the real place of Chernobyl, and to step into it did not bring about an apotheosis of truth and understanding, but an abiding sense of stupefaction. ‘Chernobyl’ itself has become a metonym for an event and a territory far larger in scale than the accident at reactor four at Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant.

If the loss of a beloved person to death confounds our emotions, minds and
imaginings in the aftermath, the kind of loss occasioned by Chernobyl is more confounding still. What do we do when the object lost is the environment itself? How is Bowlby’s model of loss (of which I will shortly say more) reconfigured? Grappling with other discrete kinds of loss, the subject is able to redefine itself and its attachments in relation to its proximity to other objects within its environment, while retaining through these very relations a proximity to the object it has lost—the existence of which, in this model, ‘does not rely totally on the subject having its gaze returned to it’ (Watkin, 2004:194). The subject of this kind of loss is unable, practically or ethically, to simply turn to another object of attachment because it is the subject’s attachments with its interconnected environment of objects itself that is the object of loss. Of course, this conundrum is further complicated by the fact that the “object of loss” is in fact not yet lost in the totality suggested by that word, but rather, “partially” lost; at stake, threatened with the total loss of annihilation.

In the case of Chernobyl, an entire territory of farmland, forests, towns and villages which had sustained both human and other-than-human life, was polluted for thousands of years with radioactive waste from a nuclear reactor explosion, and evacuated by the Soviet government. Some human beings died as a direct result of the explosion and the clean-up—inadequately protected clean-up workers, fire fighters, journalists, and medics, in addition to unborn infants and children whose bodies are most vulnerable to nuclear radiation. Thousands more—the character of Vera being a fictional example—suffered not only a loss of health, but the unspeakable loss of the very environment of being that had structured their lived experience, and sustained their relationships to home, work, tradition, history, culture and community—losses also constitutive, to a significant extent, of a loss of self. Added to this is the loss of meaning in life and of spiritual faith suffered by many. To this tally must be added the enormous and uncounted loss of non-human creatures, who died (or whose populations were compromised) as a result of the radiation and also, as was the fate of most farm and companion animals, at the hands of clean-up workers tasked with eradicating them. More confounding still is the unquantifiable damage wreaked by Chernobyl upon the living ecosystem of the affected area, a fragile interconnected system of waterways, forests, marshlands and farmlands now forever altered by radionuclides. Neither can this damage be understood as limited to this immediate
ecosystem—Chernobyl’s release of nuclear radiation into the atmosphere was detected in Sweden, and resulted in radioactive black rain upon Britain\textsuperscript{10}.

Yet, while the nuclear explosion at reactor four led to this vast and unspeakable proliferation of loss, “Chernobyl” as a territory was not, in absolute terms, itself lost. In fact, since the evacuation of humans following the disaster in 1986, the remarkable regeneration of the Exclusion Zone has been studied by scientists and reported on by journalists, and stands to complicate any assumption about what loss means in relation to ecological destruction. Almost thirty years following the disaster, the Zone is an unprecedented reminder of the resilience of nature. Somewhat ironically, not even the world’s worst nuclear disaster exceeds the adverse impact of humans upon the natural environment—virtually deserted by humans, this radioactive territory has become home to apparently thriving populations of many native and endangered species, not seen for years before the accident—wild boar, elk, eagle owls, brown bears, grey wolves, and lynx\textsuperscript{11}. In addition, the Zone has provided a precious opportunity in densely populated Europe for the reintroduction of endangered species such as European bison and Przewalski’s horse. To visit Chernobyl is not only to reckon with the eerie reminders of a vast tragedy, but also to wonder at the strange beauty of wilderness which by increments is reclaiming the austere concrete landscape of an ambitiously planned Soviet town, of farmlands long cultivated for food production, and the surrounding villages which had stood for centuries. In this way, Chernobyl offers not only the most vivid image yet of what the end of human civilization might look like, but an ecologist’s fantasy of nature transcending the destructive vice of human activity, given a chance—even under


\textsuperscript{11} See Chernobyl’s Legacy (2nd ed.), the report of The Chernobyl Forum: 2003-2005. While the Forum has been accused by groups such as CND of downplaying the consequences of the disaster, this report includes a concise account of radiation effects on plants and animals, while also noting that, ‘facilitated by the removal of human activities’, ‘the Exclusion Zone has paradoxically become a unique sanctuary for biodiversity’ (2006:29; 30). It must be acknowledged here that debate among scientists continues over such claims, as can be glimpsed in conflicting news commentary on the subject. For example, see ‘Wildlife defies Chernobyl radiation’ (2006), and ‘Chernobyl Zone shows decline in biodiversity’ (2010) on BBC News Online. Findings pertaining to Chernobyl as a haven for wildlife by Robert Baker and Ron Chesser (2006), for example, can be contrasted with findings by Anders Møller and Timothy Mousseau (2011) regarding such factors as radiation-induced mutations and selective deaths.
the shadow of radioactivity—to once again sustain interconnected populations of flora and fauna as would never be possible amid an ever-growing human population. As the site of the world’s worst nuclear disaster, Chernobyl at once stands as the prevision of post-ecological apocalypse par excellence, and confounds the idea of the apocalyptic loss of nature in its presentation of human industry and settlement regenerating into a verdant wilderness abundant with wildlife, evocative of a kind of post-human pastoral.

As epitomised by the alteration in colour of the Wormwood Forest pines around the reactor in the immediate aftermath of the accident, to the effect that the area is now better known as the Red Forest, Chernobyl’s landscape at once marks, and is marked by the signs of loss. Physical objects, man-made or cultivated by man—houses, town buildings, cars, Communist posters, dolls, cots, once-prized orchards, overgrown farms—remain behind in various states of ruin, attesting to what has taken place there. Signs bearing the symbol for radiation warn of danger in overgrown wheat fields. The iconic Pripyat Ferris wheel and dodgem cars of an amusement park that never opened continue to rust in strange arrest. The spectral “sarcophagus”, the entombed reactor four, stands silent at the power plant. Like the archaeologica remains of a past age, these revenental objects—so evocatively displaced from their original context in time and space before the accident—appear to the visitor as signifiers—markers—of the signified “Chernobyl”, vividly recalling the order of being that has been lost, and throwing into relief the radical alteration of their surroundings—facilitating a kind of sensory oscillation between what was and what is, the familiar and the strange. At the same time, these objects in themselves partially constitute the referent, the real thing to which the signified refers—because “Chernobyl” is only a kind of metanoun and metonym standing in for what is really an endless and proliferating structure of relations between such objects in space and time. If we consider the way in which these individual objects are all implicated in this wider structure of relations, we could also view these objects as metonyms; parts interconnected with a plurality of parts, a greater “whole”. Of course, also constituting “Chernobyl” within and without the environment of the Zone are a myriad of subjects living and dead—the humans who lost the environment in which they lived their lives, those who died, the few “illegal re-settlers” who stayed in the Zone—and all the other beings of the animal kingdom, from mammal to
arthropod, who have been and continue to be affected by the consequences of the disaster. On an individual and collective level, from elk to owls, untold numbers of non-human creatures have variously died, been biologically altered, and had their activity reconstituted by the Zone’s depopulation of humans. To the human visitor, evidence of this impact is everywhere. Radioactive deer antlers litter the Red Forest. White owls nest in abandoned schools. Free of fishermen, overgrown catfish fill the Pripyat River. Wild boars cross the overgrown roads between field and forest. Grey wolves congregate in crumbling ghost villages, and perch on rooftops to glimpse deer.

Moreover, an ecological understanding of the organic life-forms and processes implicated in the Chernobyl accident must also encompass organisms such as plants, insects, fungi, algae, and bacteria, as parts constituting the interdependent community of organisms, which in interacting with nonliving parts such as water, air and soil, comprise an ecosystem. As defined by the Merriam-Webster Online, an ecosystem is a ‘[c]omplex of living organisms, their physical environment, and all their interrelationships in a particular unit of space’ (Concise Encyclopedia entry, “Ecosystem, n.”, 2014).

In this way, we could say that the event and site of “Chernobyl” names not an object of loss but a vast, diverse and interconnected constellation of objects and subjects within and without the Zone, implicated in the proliferation of consequences from reactor four's release of radiation in 1986. In saying “within and without”, I refer to the way that the ongoing impact of Chernobyl extends beyond the area in which it occurred, continuing to affect its now-dispersed human population who were displaced. In addition, Chernobyl has implicated scientists, scholars, doctors, activists, politicians, aid workers and artists around the world in dealing with the fallout—working to heighten consciousness about nuclear dangers, minimise the chances of the reactor's unspent fuel being released, treat and seek justice for those suffering the health effects of radiation, studying the long-term effects of radiation from the accident, and provide a means of expressing the grief of various forms of loss. Chernobyl has also, of course, entered the collective imagination as a cautionary symbol of previously...
unimaginable disaster, in which we wagered destruction on an incredible scale with an enemy that tests the limits of comprehension (some radioactive elements, such as plutonium, will persist for thousands of years). These objects and subjects are inanimate (abandoned buildings, cars; soil and water) and animate—living organisms, encompassing not only humans but also other vertebrates and other sub-groups of the animal kingdom, in addition to insects, plants and bacteria, and the interconnected systems in which these organisms exist.

Chernobyl is not simply a lost object. Rather, as mentioned, it names a network of countless individual subjects of loss and objects of loss. As such, the case of Chernobyl confounds Bowlby’s theory of object relations. For example, how does the human subject of loss adapt by forming new attachments to objects within their environment when it is this environment itself that is lost? Moreover, by positioning the environment itself as subject, and by reinterpreting “re-attachment” as the adaptation of connections within an ecological network, we can subvert Bowlby’s paradigm to view the Exclusion Zone as quite effectively reconstituting its order of relations with the entities it connects and is connected to—the ecological system—in order to adapt to the relative absence of humans and the presence of radionuclides in its soil, waters, flora and fauna. At the same time, the Zone complicates the Bowlbyan concept of what Watkin terms a “metonymic environment”. As has been discussed, we experience and grapple with loss through the physical world of objects that remain behind after loss, objects through which we variously experience the proximity and distance of the lost object. These objects function metonymically as parts standing in for the untotalisable “whole” of absence (or death). Now that the object of loss is gone, it is only through our relations with the objects present around us that we can relate to the object we have lost. Such objects—a possession belonging to the lost one, a place in which we remember being with them—thus function as signs, or more specifically, as metonyms, standing in for the unquantifiable otherness of loss in our lives. The case of Chernobyl conflates the traditional scene of loss—Bowlby’s “metonymic environment” of objects that remain behind to speak of this loss and

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to evoke the proximity and distance of the lost object—with the lost object itself, and also with the mourning subject. This conflation strikes at the heart of why encountering the Zone is such a stupefying experience. Effectively, in many ways the Zone has been lost, to the extent that its once thriving human community of towns, agriculture and industry has perished, and thousands of people have literally lost their homes. And yet, the Zone itself remains, as physically real as it ever was. Moreover, it is only the loss of its human population that has enabled its woodlands and many species of wildlife to regenerate—where before the accident it was they who were being lost. With some paperwork and a guide, one can go there and walk around, literally return to the scene of loss. In doing so, one is confronted with a constellation of objects that not only attest to the different forms of loss that have occurred, but which themselves emanate from and constitute the occasion and environment of that loss. These objects not only function as material signifiers signifying the idea (mental concept or signified) of Chernobyl, but they are themselves singular, real components of the referent Chernobyl. That is, unlike in literary signification, as signifiers these physical objects do not negate the real referent in order to evoke an idea of the referent—rather they constitute a real part of the greater integrated entity that constitutes Chernobyl, and so in fact embody the metonymic interrelation of part and whole. That is, from the perspective of semiotics, the Zone’s environment is constituted of objects (signs) in which the material medium (that functions to signify the mental concept) and the real thing referred to are congruent. As evidenced through this case of Chernobyl, there is a sense in which the “metonymic environment” of ecological loss confounds our traditional means of comprehending and signifying loss, when what is “lost” is the scene of traditional loss and pastoral elegy, which paradoxically also remains—and when the objects through which we might trope this loss are in fact remnants of this loss.

To encounter the Zone is to enter a rich web of paradox. It is to walk around in a real and fertile landscape that has survived a Job-like devastation, yet which is itself an object of (subjective) loss and increasingly the object of a noir subculture (just Google the S.T.A.L.K.E.R. video games, or search ‘radioactive wolves’ on YouTube). For myself, and I imagine for certain others, visiting Chernobyl as what might be called a “dark tourist” was also to confront the question of my own ferocious fascination for a place that is unique on Earth in
providing the opportunity to glimpse what a post-apocalyptic landscape, a verdant yet post-nuclear radioactive landscape in the process of overtaking all evidence of human civilization and returning to wilderness, might look like. Was my fascination unseemly? Did it disrespect or negate the real tragedy of Chernobyl and the individuals involved? Certainly, looking out of a bus window and seeing ghostly clusters of ruined villages, obscured by trees, rush past—and walking through the collapsing rooms of a kindergarten abandoned and decaying for as long as I have been alive, to ponder old drawings, broken cots, and dolls in arrest since 1986—is an ethically fraught enterprise. Complicating the situation further is the undeniable thrill, the frisson of the imagination in entering such a radically strange landscape, the surreal sensation of inhabiting a dream or a science fiction film—as I stood in the silence of a city giving over to trees, the city of Pripyat, arrested in the Soviet eighties of Gorbachev. In the area surrounding the city centre, paths with names like ‘Lenin Boulevard’ are overgrown, and still surprise the walker with the odd public mural, standing like milestones in the ground. Wandering around the city centre’s industrial concrete expanse, I squinted at the solid grey forms of a bank, a supermarket, a hotel, a leisure centre, a cinema and the many apartment blocks, windowless and often filled with incipient trees, many still heralding their titles on signs in bold Soviet capitals. As I strained to imagine these buildings and this place almost three decades before, at times I experienced a shock of recognition at a poster, a shoe, or a history book, uncanny artefacts that provoked in me a visceral sensation of the familiar within the strange; which moved me and which, like conduits, animated in my imagination a sense of what had once been. There is an undoubtable aspect of voyeurism to encountering the Zone as a tourist, in which the landscape becomes an aesthetic object provoking both awe and fear, an experience linked to the sublime. To wander in a landscape evacuated of humans is to be launched into a future subjectivity, the awkward narrative position of the last man, the sole human survivor on a planet that has transcended us.

The Zone is a site of tragedy, a cautionary tragedy of the nuclear age which, if not for the actions of the clean-up workers, could have been unimaginably worse, and yet most strongly I registered the peace and beauty of such a vast area in overpopulated Europe being allowed, even in radioactivity, to offer haven to non-human forms of plant and animal life that our civilisation continues to diminish, at
our own risk and to our own impoverishment. To a degree, the landscape of the Zone animated my own fantasy of a post-human futurity in which we do not take nature down with us, and the natural world in some measure survives humanity's self-destruction. Finally, the ethical question of my visit to Chernobyl to “see what it’s really like”, was compounded by my desire to write of it in a novel, through characters; to make of it a subject for fiction.

As the case of Chernobyl indicates, invoking the word “loss” in relation to an environment opens up a host of questions that demand scrutiny, particularly in view of the traditional elegiac movement. What happens when the “object” of loss is also a living ecosystem, comprised of many living subjects, and a site that the mourner can physically return to? What happens when the pastoral background that has for so long animated the elegy with natural tropes, is itself the lost object? How are we to reconceive of the lost object in such a way as to acknowledge that, as with Chernobyl, the “lost object” is in fact a multiplicitous network of organisms and processes that continues to exist and change, without negating the real loss that it represents? In seeking to address such questions, we must also interrogate what we mean when we use terms like nature, environment and ecology. Moreover, Chernobyl provides a vivid lens through which to critique the strange and unseemly desire that is implicated in not only imagining (through elegiac and speculative writing), but in actually visiting the site of, an eco-apocalypse. At the same time, the case of Chernobyl complicates our ideas about what such an apocalypse might constitute.

Defining eco-loss

How are we to define the paradoxical instance of ecological loss, such as that represented by Chernobyl, in contrast to the absolute, bounded physical loss occasioned by, for example, the death of a person? In addressing this question, it is necessary to consider in greater detail the scope of varied meanings encompassed by the words “loss” and “absence”, as they pertain to the experience
and the state of (non) being or (non) presence. Interrogating the limits of these words in relation to the kind of absolute physical loss/absence entailed by the word “death”, will clarify their application to the experience of mourning, and to the kind of destruction and threat that mobilises ecological elegy. Doing so is particularly important in discussing eco-elegy, considering the fact that the majority of the literature within elegy studies conflates loss with physical death, specifically human death, and assumes that the meanings encompassed by the terms death, loss and absence, and the boundaries between them, are self-evident. The following overview draws from the *OED’s* exhaustive definitions, which assist in unpicking the dominant modes in which these terms are used, delineating the ways in which they pertain to relative and subjective states in addition to absolute, objective states.

The *OED Online* (2014) defines the word loss generally as pertaining to: ‘Perdition, ruin, destruction; the condition or fact of being ‘lost’, destroyed, or ruined’, but assists by then delineating in detail the following diverse ways in which loss can pertain to ‘[t]he fact of losing’ (emphases are mine):

a. *The being deprived of, or the failure to keep* (a possession, appurtenance, right, quality, faculty, or the like).

b. Loss of life n. the being put to death (as a punishment). Also, in generalized sense, the destruction or ‘sacrifice’ of human lives.

c. *The being deprived by death, separation, or estrangement*, of (a friend, relative, servant, or the like). Often contextually, the death (of a person regretted).

d. The losing of or being defeated in (a battle, game, or contest). Formerly also without specific mention of the object: The state of being a loser, defeat.

e. Failure to take advantage or make good use (of time, etc.).

f. Failure to gain or obtain.

Exempting further highly subject-specific applications of the word, loss is also defined as:

5a. *Diminution of one's possessions or advantages; detriment or disadvantage involved in being deprived of something, or resulting from a change of conditions;* an instance of this. (Opposed to gain.)

b. To have a (great) loss in (or of): to suffer severely by losing (usually, a person).
Absence, on the other hand, is defined by the *OED Online* primarily as:

1. The state of being absent or away from a place, or from the company of a person or persons.
2. Want, lack, privation, or failure of something; an instance of this (“Absence, n.”, 2014).

By contrast, the *OED Online* defines death primarily as:

1. The act or fact of dying; the end of life; the permanent cessation of the vital functions of a person, animal, plant, or other organism.
2. The state of being physically dead; the state or condition of being without life.

Additional definitions relevant to our purposes include:

5. Cessation of the existence or duration of a thing; end, disappearance, destruction; (also) the cause or occasion of this.
9. Loss of viability of tissue or of a part of the body of an organism.
11. Chiefly literary. Loss of sensation or vitality; unconsciousness, or a weakening of consciousness, as in sleep or orgasm (“Death, n.”, 2014).

As these detailed definitions indicate, the conditions of loss, absence and death are neither limited to the absolute, objective meanings they are often reduced to, nor as distinct as might be assumed—the boundaries between loss, absence and death are blurred. Just as loss can entail a literal ‘loss of life, the being put to death’ or ‘being deprived by death’, so can loss entail deprivation by means of ‘separation, or estrangement’ or ‘the failure to keep (a possession, appurtenance, right, quality, faculty, or the like).’ Absence, similarly, pertains not only to objective instances of absolute absence, like death, total disappearance or annihilation—but also to subjective instances: ‘being absent or away from a place, or from the company of a person or persons’; ‘Want, lack, privation, or failure of something’. Also
important is the way in which death pertains not only to the physical ‘end of life; the permanent cessation of the vital functions of a person, animal, plant, or other organism’ but to the ‘Cessation of the existence or duration of a thing; end, disappearance, destruction’ and even to a ‘loss of vitality’.

Ultimately, it is via the understanding of loss as deprivation, (to which might be added diminishment) or estrangement, and absence as want, lack, or privation, and death as a state that can pertain to ecosystems as well as humans or animals, that we can negotiate the fraught territory of eco-loss and eco-elegy.

**Ecological elegy**

*Human society now finds itself in the midst of a mass extinction: a global evolutionary convulsion with few parallels in the entire history of life.*

– John Tuxill, *Losing Strands in the Web of Life*

In his essay ‘The Dark Ecology of Elegy’ (2010), Timothy Morton offers a timely and thought-provoking consideration of ecological writing as it pertains specifically to the elegiac mode, discussing some of the key formal and ethical challenges of the form. Reiterating the traditional distinctions of Freud, Morton argues that a more responsible eco-elegy would resist the follow-through of “healthy” mourning, and espouse a melancholic movement of non-acceptance. Morton’s argument, however, is complicated by certain inconsistencies and contradictions, in addition to a lack of clarity in defining and qualifying key terms and concepts, as will be discussed in this and later chapters. While engaging with Morton’s essay, the following section considers some of the paradoxes and complexities of negotiating the ecological elegy as a form, and argues that any attempt to conceive of an ethical poetics of writing eco-elegy must examine and (re)define the signifier “loss” alongside the signifier “nature”, whereas, in
Morton’s (albeit brief) essay, attendance to the former is lacking. Elegy, in both its traditional poetic form, and, perhaps even more commonly, as a more general literary tone or mode in prose, is a major form in ecological literature, a fact that is unsurprising considering mounting awareness of our planetary ecological crisis. At the same time, from its earliest origins, elegy has been bound up with the natural world, the scene of skies, rivers, birds and flowers, against which the speaker’s grief is staged, the presence of which throws into relief the reality of loss, through which the speaker grapples with how to live in this loss, and in which is lodged the tropes that animate the poem. That is, just as elegy is increasingly associated with ecological loss, as Morton notes, ‘elegy is also ecological’, inasmuch as its ‘formal topics and tropes are environmental’ (2010:252). Elegies are staged in an environment, whether pastoral or urban, that, perhaps more resonantly than in any other literary form, is foregrounded in both the narrative and poetic tropes of the text. For the world or environment of the elegist, in remaining behind after the thing they have lost, is animated by that loss and offers itself to the elegist in speaking of that loss. Moreover, there is something almost radically tautological in ecological elegy, in which—beyond functioning as the backdrop against which grief is staged, the presence which throws absence into greater relief, and the source of the poetic tropes that structure and vivify the writing—the environment itself is configured as the principal subject(s), or, as it may be object(s). As Morton notes, ecological language might be seen as predisposed to the elegiac mode because ‘nature is the ultimate lost object’ and ‘the never-arriving terminus of a metonymic series: birds, flowers, mountains’ (2010:252-3).

Complicating ecological elegy further is its uncertain relation to time, when necessarily it speaks of ‘events that have not yet (fully) happened’ and, diverging sharply from traditional elegy, ‘weeps for that which will have passed given a continuation of the current state of affairs’ (Morton, 2010:254). This strange simultaneity of looking back while looking forward in ‘prophecy’ is a reality of reading ecological elegy, suggests Morton, and ‘reproduces dualism’ (2010:254). It is also, of course, a reality of writing such elegy. If an event that has not yet fully happened is elegised, so Morton contends, the elegy effectively ‘undermines’ the act of mourning at the very moment it is performed (2010:254).
What Morton asserts of such apocalypticism in implicating the reader is also true of the writer who envisions it, engendering:

(...) a decidedly un-ecological subject position, sitting back and letting the other take care of business. The content may be lamentation, but the subject position is passive enjoyment (2010:254).

Moreover, what is at stake in such writing and reading—which takes for granted that, at the current rate of ecological destruction and socio-political complacency, nature and our primal connection to it are as good as lost—is of a greater scale than what is at stake when we try, and fail, to perform the “true” mourning of someone who has died, in literature or in life. In addition, while the gravity of the ecological threat must of course be written and read about creatively as well as scientifically, the recent eco-elegiac “turn” in modern creative literature (poetry and prose) underlines the fact that, like death, ecological disaster makes for a compelling story to read, and rich material for writing. The vertiginous totality of destruction that such ecological apocalypticism envisions, not on a fantasy planet but on our own in the not-so-distant future, strains the imagination and terrifies the mind, and offers a subject of biblical proportions. In presenting this familiar world as strange, apocalyptic visions elicit the strange thrill of the uncanny, only intensified when we know that such a vision, as a trajectory of our current predicament, is not a long bow to draw. However, the category of aesthetic fascination that perhaps lends most enduring power to representations of eco-apocalypse is that of the sublime, which Edmund Burke, in 1752, described as a sensory phenomenon ‘excit[ing] ideas of pain, and danger’ alongside the ‘terrible’ and which draws forth ‘the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling’ (2008:39). Burke emphasises that:

When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and are delightful, as we everyday experience (2008:40).

Here, Burke describes another strain of “unseemly” glee, or faintly monstrous pleasure derived from the sensory frisson that the terrible inspires in us as
spectators, writers and readers. While much fetishised in learned aristocratic
circles of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there is something universal and
timeless about our fascination for disaster on a sublime scale. Intrinsic to the
experience of the sublime, however, is a privileged subject position—while we
must be near enough to the terrible to be awed and threatened by it, in order to
feel its strange thrill we must have the leisure to contemplate, at an aesthetic
distance from real danger. Whether or not ecological apocalypse is imagined as
the total annihilation of Earth itself, or of humanity only, in order to create such a
vision, a witness is required (whether foregrounded or effaced in the narrative),
with Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826) being a paradigmatic example. As
Morton puts it, ‘consciousness goes on—we always imagine total destruction
from some impossible imaginary vantage point, a future anterior’ (2010:254).
Morton could as easily be speaking of the sublime when he discerns that ‘our love
of nature is based on our capacity for devouring it’ (2010:255). Unlike the writer
who elegises the loss of other kinds of objects, the writer who writes ecological
loss is challenged by an object that is unbounded, measureless and not yet fully
lost. Morton suggests this produces a ‘dilemma at the formal level’ when elegy
‘presupposes the very loss it wants to prevent’, ‘getting rid of’ nature before full
destruction occurs’ (2010:255). This movement reveals ‘the sadism of the
(ecological) elegiac mode’ when it ‘kills nature for a second time, before it has
fully happened for the first time’ (2010:255). Morton suggests that the
‘narcissistic panic’ of eco-apocalypticism in elegy not only resigns itself to loss
too soon, but also, in the vertiginous flurry of burying nature for good, ‘fails fully
to account for the actual loss of actually existing species and environments’
unhelpfully paradoxical, and at worst implicated in the aggression towards the
biosphere with which its content tries to frighten us’ (2010:255). Asserts Morton,
‘[e]cological poetry must thus transcend the elegiac mode’ (2010:255), suggesting
that to do this, the very idea of “nature” must evolve, from ‘something ‘over
there’, the ultimate lost object’ to a more complex and ethical comprehension of
ecology itself as the ‘thinking [of] how all beings are interconnected, in as deep a
way as possible’ (2010:255).

While Morton raises useful points in observing key challenges facing the
ecological elegy as a form, his neglect to examine the signifier of loss alongside
his critique of the signifier “nature” is inconsistent and confusing. Without qualifying the diverse meanings that “loss” can encompass, he speaks of traditional elegiac loss as an absolute that is thus incompatible with a responsible ecological reckoning with ecological destruction, before considering how a responsible elegiac mode might proceed in a way that resists giving up nature as lost. Morton’s consequent proposition of a melancholic elegiac mode that resists closure is undermined by the fact that, as with any elegiac form, a melancholic elegy still proceeds from an instance or apprehension of loss. What is required, here, I contend, is an attendance at once to how such a responsible elegiac mode would focalise and converge around loss as discrete, immediate and located instances within a greater reality in-process, instead of smearing over the contingency of Earth’s ecological systems by mourning for all nature as a generality, and as an absolute loss. Moreover, it must be recognised that both the terms loss and nature (or environment, ecology) operate as metonyms for what is really a series of encounters, or a network of (inter)relations. When I lose my friend to death or my country to civil war, while one loss is absolute and the other conditional, in both instances what I “lose” is in fact the continuation of a series of encounters made possible by the existence of my living friend, or my ability to live in my country. I lose the opportunity to continue encountering the other in its living alterity, to have the other outside of my subjectivity as an entity able to surprise me in a living exchange with difference. Instead, I am left only with my memory of these encounters, a circumstance of reduction and impoverishment. Similarly, when we invoke the words “nature”, “ecology” and “environment”, we invoke a stand-in term for an infinite network of interrelated but discrete organisms, organic elements and processes that constitute planet Earth, from a micro to macro level. As will be discussed in the following chapters, it is in this understanding of loss as a diminishment of contingency, complexity and diversity, and as a deprivation of the opportunity to encounter difference, that we can develop a more rigorous framework for thinking ethical eco-elegy. By examining Derrida’s complication of the question of ethical mourning, we can discern how a responsible writing of ecological loss can in many ways be guided by what constitutes a responsible commemoration of and for the friend.
3

Eco-loss, mourning & melancholia

*It is not Christ who is crucified now, it is the tree itself...*

– John Fowles, *The Tree*

*What must be said here is the impossibility of telling about this place, here, and this grave. But even so, one can kiss the gray granite and weep over you.*

– Marguerite Duras, ‘The Death of the Young British Pilot’, in *Writing*

How do we mourn ethically in elegy for a loss that is at once real and yet so divergent from the discrete, bounded, finite loss of (most) traditional mourning? Ecological loss refers to a phenomenon that, in its being at once contingent and constitutive of a *loss* of contingency, is amorphous, insidious, non-finite, and non-absolute. Ecological loss refers to the loss of vital components of a wider structure, where each such loss threatens not only the loss of another component, but always a greater loss, the loss of the whole interdependent system, the stakes of which are ever-rising because it is all the time in-motion—as by increments vital drylands become desert. We live now under the perpetual, lengthening shadow of this loss, a loss that is happening without yet “having happened”; it is no wonder that writers are increasingly imagining a near future in which this shadow falls over us all. This chapter examines the implications of Morton’s argument that a melancholic elegiac mode presents a more ethical mode of representing ecology in crisis. In doing so, Morton’s critique of the ideal of
nature, and his proposition of “dark ecology” in contrast to “deep green ecology”, will also be considered. Ultimately, this chapter argues that any use of a term as culturally and critically loaded as melancholia must be more rigorously qualified, and must involve a greater attendance not only to the future loss that is now irremediable due to global warming, but to our human culpability and answerability in light of this loss.

**Nature/ecology**

From Bill McKibben in *The End of Nature* (1989) to William Cronon in ‘The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature’ (1995), and Val Plumwood in ‘Nature in the Active Voice’ (2009), the term “nature” as a site of contested and contradictory meanings has long been the object of critical interrogation by environmental and cultural philosophers. While, like Morton, most identify nature as a problematic construct in need of rethinking, their conclusions vary markedly. In the escalating effects of human activity on the biosphere, and the encroachment of human civilization on every aspect of a natural environment he views as having once been defined by its independence from us, McKibben discerns “the end of nature” as we have known it. In suggesting that ‘we are at the end of nature’, McKibben explains:

(...) I do not mean the end of the world. Though they may change dramatically, the rain will still fall, and the sun shine. When I say ‘nature’, I mean a certain set of human ideas about the world and our place in it. But the death of these ideas begins with definite changes in the reality around us – changes that scientists can measure and enumerate. More and more frequently these changes will clash with our perceptions, until, finally, our mistaken sense of nature as eternal and separate will be washed away and we will see all too clearly what we have done (1990:7).

13 See also Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980).
By contrast, Cronon is critical of such potentially totalising claims, suggesting that McKibben’s essay is affected by the very ideas about nature that have the capacity to obscure or prevent real progress toward a more ecologically sustainable coexistence of human and non-human life (1996:82-3). As Cronon notes:

The point is not that our current problems are trivial, or that our devastating effects on the earth’s ecosystems should be accepted as inevitable or “natural”. It is rather that we seem unlikely to make much progress in solving these problems if we hold up to ourselves as the mirror of nature a wilderness we ourselves cannot inhabit (1996:83).

For Cronon, the idea of having caused the ‘end of nature’ overlooks the fact that humans have been altering the natural environment for as long as we have existed, and moreover is symptomatic of the dualistic thinking that positions human civilization to one side and pristine nature or wilderness to the other, suggesting that the only way to preserve nature is in fact to remove ourselves from it, an evidently unproductive conclusion for environmentalism (1996:83). Such thinking also perpetuates the notion that ‘we are separate from nature’, a notion only ‘likely to reinforce environmentally irresponsible behavior’ (Cronon, 1996:87). Ultimately, in looking forward, Cronon affirms the ecological importance of recognising at once that we are inextricably connected with nature, and that we exist among nonhuman nature, life forms autonomous and other to us, commanding of honour and respect (1996:87-8). In doing so, Cronon argues that we must move beyond pious binaries of ‘the human and the nonhuman, the unnatural and the natural, the fallen and un fallen’, in favour of embracing and taking responsibility for nature as it exists in all its forms, not only in the wild but also in our suburbs, cities and backyards; ‘the Other within’, ‘next door’ and ‘around us’ (1996:89). This would constitute a movement away from our cultural creations of nature and wilderness, which remain invested with all kinds of desire and denial, variously pertaining to an Eden from which we are exiled, the ‘savage’ frontier of civilisation, a frontier landscape of escape and freedom, and an opportunity to encounter ‘the sacred sublime’—ideas that also run throughout
environmentalist thinking (Cronon, 1996:79). Suggests Cronon, ‘[t]o think ourselves capable of causing “the end of nature” is an act of great hubris, for it means forgetting the wildness that dwells everywhere within and around us’, not to mention the fact that nonhuman nature will likely survive any event of human annihilation— as the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone portends (1996:89). It is worthwhile noting here that Cronon’s critique of the concept of wilderness has itself elicited disparaging criticism from wilderness advocate and environmental historian Samuel P. Hays, who suggests that Cronon’s thinking suffers from a lack of knowledge about ‘the more day-to-day and down-to-earth ideas and actions’ informing the reality of the wilderness movement (1996:30). Drawing from his own experience of this reality in the North-American context, Hays disputes Cronon’s perception of the movement as positioning wilderness in ‘some remote area’ beyond the local, as prioritising for protection only areas seen as pristine, and as invested in the idea of nature as a romantic ideal (1996:30-1). In Hays’s experience, the wilderness movement in fact is more frequently mobilised around ‘the area of one’s personal experience—my backyard’, and focuses not on protecting wilderness in ‘some “original” or “pristine” condition’, but rather on ‘“saving” wilderness areas from development’, and ‘“saving” for the future’ (1996:30). Moreover, Hays suggests that, rather than being grounded in a romantic and elitist relationship to nature, the idea of wilderness has emerged through a history and culture of ‘outdoor recreation’, which is in fact ‘middle class’ (1996:30-1). While Hays demonstrates, in this critique, the importance of qualifying claims made about discrete areas of environmental action within the context of environmental philosophy, Cronon’s interrogation of the idea of wilderness remains valuable to a consideration, more generally, of nature as a cultural signifier. More recently, Australian ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood has astutely emphasised the ways in which our dominant cultural paradigm of ‘[h]uman-centredness’ encourages ‘delusions of being ecologically invulnerable, beyond animality and ‘outside nature’ [which] lead to the failure to understand our ecological identities and dependencies on nature’ (2009:online). Such human-centredness is detrimental to humans and non-humans alike, suggests Plumwood, implicated in both ‘ethical’ and ‘prudential’ ecological failures, and as
such necessitates a rethinking of the binary between “deep” and “shallow” ecological thinking (2009:online). Further, Plumwood notes that Western:

> [h]uman/nature dualism conceives the human as not only superior to but as different in kind from the non-human, which is conceived as a lower non-conscious and non-communicative purely physical sphere that exists as a mere resource or instrument for the higher human one (2009:online).

Implicated in such dualistic thinking of the human as separate from nature is also, suggests Plumwood, ‘the reduction of nature’ to inanimate things ‘emptied of agency, spirit and intelligence’; ‘dead matter, to which some separate driver has to add life, organization, intelligence and design’ (2009:online).

With less precision than Plumwood, Morton, in arguing for an ethical melancholic mode for eco-elegy, also problematises human conceptions of nature—specifically, the idea of nature as an ideal entity that we have lost, of which he suggests ecology and ecological thinking must be exorcised. In advancing this view of nature as a problematic metaphysical construct at odds with both the ecological reality of the world around us and with responsible ecological thought, Morton’s argument echoes Cronon’s. In the unnecessarily confusing formulation Morton proposes, we must at once ‘lose nature’ as ‘the ultimate lost object’, and espouse a melancholic mode of elegy that would constitute “an acknowledgement that ‘nature’ is not lost” (2010:255). However, Morton’s insistence that “nature” as an aestheticised ideal must be and is indeed lost, obfuscates his argument that we must engage in an active awareness of the fact that, despite ongoing destruction, we have not lost ecology—as he states, we must ‘lose nature, but gain ecology’ (2010:255). Much of this confusion is due simply to the fact that Morton, as in this example, routinely opposes the terms nature and ecology, and privileges using “ecology” and “ecological” over “nature” and “natural” without qualifying his framing of these terms—which elsewhere are commonly interchanged. The reasons for substituting one term for another are not self-evident, and such substitution, unqualified, solves little. Of

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14 This argument is expanded in Morton’s *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2009).
course, Morton’s meaning here seems to be that we must move on from thinking of nature as “something ‘over there’, the ultimate lost object”, in order to develop a more responsible thinking about our interconnectedness with ecology (or nature)—yet the divergent meanings with which these crucial terms are inflected are never made explicit (2010:255). Neither is his critique of “nature”, and preferencing of “ecology”, presented in the context of the recent history of such critiques by those such as McKibben or Cronon, as might have been helpful. Moreover, Morton’s notion that we must “lose” the idea of nature as an ideal that is “lost” (a confusing double negative), requires more discussion than it is afforded, in order to be demarcated from the real and quantifiable ecological loss that has irrevocably occurred and that is in the process of occurring—the very loss that warrants not only an elegiac mode but, supposedly, Morton's own melancholic mode of mourning. Dismissing the idealised construct of nature as an illusion, and asserting the prominence of nature as a vital reality in diverse forms all around us—as Morton, after Cronon, does—fails to address the way in which we are regardless facing an ecological threat of such proportions that terminal language like “end”, “death” and “loss” are necessarily invoked in reference to whatever it is we choose to call the fragile, interconnected web of human and non-human life on this planet. As attested by a body of scientific evidence that grows by the day, we now live in a present, and face a future, of irreversible transformation due to human-induced global warming, a reality that endangers human and non-human life alike. While Cronon cites the precedence of comparable environmental changes in geological history not caused by humans (1996:13), the scale and implications of human-induced climate change have continued to emerge, since his 1995 essay, as constituting a threat unprecedented in the history of earth. Attesting to the scale of this threat is the growing currency, among diverse thinkers and writers, of the as-yet unofficial term “Anthropocene” to describe our present geological epoch, in which human activity has become a literal force of nature. As a geological epoch, the Anthropocene is inscribed with the terrifying scale of human agency in determining our planetary future, and suggests that, to a real, biospheric extent,

beyond our cultural ideas of what nature is, the otherness and autonomy of the nonhuman world has been and is in the process of being immeasurably and irreperably diminished. If the idea of nature as a lost ideal object is a fallacy to be thrown off, and yet ethical elegy comprises of affirming that nature is not lost, then it is important to qualify why and to what extent nature is not lost, by demarcating what loss, in this context, encompasses. This is especially true in light of the way that it is through a melancholic mode of mourning—a mode which, in literature as in life, is mobilised by real and symbolic loss—that Morton suggests elegists affirm this truth “that ‘nature’ is not lost” (2010:255).

Eco-loss as deprivation

Morton’s neglect to demarcate a frame of reference for the word "loss" as it pertains to eco-elegy, as discussed in the previous chapter, only compounds the confusion created by this inadequate attendance to the consequences of real and quantifiable ecological loss in discussing eco-elegy. The ecological loss that has already occurred is cause enough for mourning, let alone the dire and immeasurable scale of loss we face in coming decades and centuries. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and other scientific bodies, we have now moved well beyond the point of no return for a rise in global temperature that will immeasurably alter our way of life and the ecosystems in which we exist—the question now is only by how much. Compounding the challenges of a warming planet is the prospect of a global population which recent United Nations (2013) estimates predict will reach 9.6 billion by 2050, and which appears unlikely to cease rising this century (Gerland, et. al, 2014). In the face of such predictions, it is unsurprising that our critical and creative literatures are increasingly speaking of our global habitat in modes that are not only elegiac, but also terminal, negative and non-consolatory. The stakes of our present ecological predicament are driving increasingly radical forms of literary mourning and warning, to the point where, in works such as McKibben’s, lamentation for
foregone loss, and incipient loss that appears irremediable, saturates the corresponding call “to do something before it’s too late” to a more radical degree than evidenced in earlier eco-elegiac literatures. The tradition of ecological lamentation, which simultaneously mourns foregone loss while looking to the future in warning of possible consequences if no action is taken, can be understood within the jeremiad tradition. As noted in *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, the term “jeremiad” recalls ‘the biblical prophet who wore sackcloth and ashes to demonstrate his grief over Israel’s failure to live up to its covenant as God’s chosen people’ (2010:online). The ecological jeremiad can be traced back to Rachel Carson’s incendiary 1962 call for action against the U.S. chemical industry, in *Silent Spring*, which opens with ‘A Fable for Tomorrow’, in which Carson warns of what the future might entail if nothing changes—a “silent” spring, absent of birds and bees (1-3). However writers of eco-elegy engage or resist the jeremiad tradition of prophecy, warning and call to action, the degree to which we recognise eco-loss as a divergent phenomenon, at once foregone, in-process and incipient—and thus contingent, no matter how likely disaster may seem—is surely key to an eco-elegiac ethics. In face of the scientific data that speaks, variously, to the ecological losses already sustained, currently in-process and toward which we are heading, it is easy to understand the increasing prominence of elegy as a literary mode in which ecology is represented. It must be acknowledged that, in fact, a great deal can and has been predicted (and to a certain point, ensured) regarding the ecological loss that is to come, a loss that is manifesting such real presence in scientific discourse and daily life that it is not only understandable, but imperative that it is also engaged with in our creative literatures, not least in elegy, our preeminent literary form for reckoning with the consequences of loss. The kind of incipient loss we are facing on a global scale due to climate change, overpopulation and the economic, political and industrial exploitation of our natural environments does and must have a real presence in elegy, despite and because of the fact that it “has not happened yet”. The incremental and insidious process of environmental destruction as it has occurred since the Industrial Revolution is such that it will never “have happened” in the

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16 For a detailed discussion of the cultural history of (non-ecological) jeremiad in the American context, see Sacvan Bercovitch’s *The American Jeremiad* (1978).
absolute sense of being able to identify a line between before and after, as we can
in speaking of losing a person who has died—because at that hypothetical point
we, as part of the environment, will presumably no longer be here to speak of it.
Consequently, we must develop a mode of speaking about not only absolute eco-
loss but eco-loss that is incipient and in-process, in such a way as to arrest feeling
and attention at the point of this moment now, in the contingency of the present,
on the verge of a future that is, to a great degree, still to be written, by the actions
we take now. In this light, blasé platitudes about nature not being lost, which
speak to the (already much-discussed) dangers and fallacies of idealising nature,
are deeply inadequate to our current predicament. Certainly we should be mindful
of and resist idealising nature as an object, but nature as a real, living biosphere on
which we depend is gravely at risk of being lost in all kinds of very real ways that
a refrain like this obscures. This loss is predicted not by elegists writing
apocalypse but by scientists and other experts making careful projections from
current evidence and a reality in which, regardless of what measures we take now,
a global temperature rise beyond the already dangerous 2°C “safety” threshold for
catastrophic implications is virtually guaranteed17. Attesting to the urgency of this
conundrum is the recent decision by science historians Naomi Oreskes and Erik
Conway, despairing at the failure of the calmly-worded statements of the IPCC to
induce adequate socio-political change, to write a science-based novel set in the
near future, entitled The Collapse of Western Civilisation: A View From the
Future (2014), imagining in visceral detail the future we might be headed for
should we continue on our current course.

One need only consult the statistics and projections of bodies such as the
IPCC and World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) to obtain a sense of the real
ecological loss that has already occurred as a result of human-induced ecosystem
degradation, pollution and climate change—and the gravity of the future we face

17 Climate scientist James Hansen is among those who have argued the 2°C benchmark is itself
dangerous, labelling it ‘a prescription for disaster’, as reported by Scientific American
(2011:online). Yet, there is increasing doubt among experts about whether even this limit is
attainable. Fatih Birol, chief economist at the International Energy Agency (IEA), suggested in
2011 that ‘[w]ith current policies in place, global temperatures are set to increase 6 degrees
Celsius, which has catastrophic implications’ (IEA:online). He further noted that, ‘[i]f as of 2017
there is not a start of a major wave of new and clean investments, the door to 2 degrees will be
closed’ (IEA:online).
even if radical widespread preventative action is taken soon. Many of these projections are, in a great sense, apocalyptic, and they are founded on scientific evidence which is now irrefutable, despite systemised campaigns of denial. The WWF indicates that conservative estimates of the species currently being lost to extinction are of ‘between 200 and 2,000’ each year, while ‘upper estimate(s)’ suggest ‘between 10,000 and 100,000’ (WWF:online). This is an astounding rate of extinction, unprecedented in the history of extinction events on Earth in its being caused by human beings rather than by independently arising geological processes. The IPCC predicts possible ‘impacts associated from global average temperature change’ as including decreases in water availability, biodiversity, and coastal wetlands, and notes the possibility of a 30% increase in extinction rates (2007:online). IPCC data (2007:online) also stipulates that drought, water and food shortages, and the health impacts of increased climate-related diseases, would lead to high loss of human life. Ultimately, the implications that such data speaks to are death, deprivation and diminution—loss in many forms, and on an enormous scale.

Mourning & melancholia

Just as Morton’s discussion is troubled by a lack of clarity in defining the different meanings and forms of loss, so is the exact nature of his meaning in invoking the loaded terms “melancholia” and “melancholic mourning”, in relation to the elegiac mode, inadequately, and somewhat too glibly, defined.

In advancing his argument that a melancholic elegiac mode is a more ethical means of approaching the elegiac writing of a threatened environment, Morton observes a crucial distinction between traditional elegy and ecological elegy, stating that, while in the former ‘the person departs and the environment echoes our woe’, in the latter, ‘the fear is that we will go on living, while the environment disappears around us’ (2010:253), or, I might add, that we might all die. As Morton astutely observes, our own human implication as part of the environment
prevents us from being able to stand as subjects apart from the object we are mourning:

We cannot mourn for the environment because we are so deeply attached to it—we are it. So ecological discourse holds out the possibility of a mourning without end. Ecological elegy, then, must provide forms that undermine a sense of closure. (2010:253).

It is in this light that Morton suggests that ‘the truest ecological human is a melancholy dualist, mourning for something we never lost because we never had it, because we are it’ (2010:253). While this formulation represents a vast oversimplification, and is far from original, Morton makes the relevant point here that “nature” has long been viewed as an ideal object, in opposition to the human subject and to civilisation, an Edenic origin in the kind of metaphysical thinking that thinkers such as Derrida have proven so dangerous, and which has underwritten the history of humanity’s exploitation of what is in fact a fragile, finite and contingent living system on which we all depend. In considering the operations of elegy under this radical transposition in which the environment as ‘backdrop becomes the foreground’, Morton posits melancholy as ‘an irreducible element of subjectivity, a primordial relationship to objects rather than one emotion among others’ (2010:253). Noting how, in the ancient theory of humourism, melancholy was considered ‘the humor that brought humans closest to the earth’, Morton suggests that ‘melancholy may provide the basis for an ecological fidelity to objects’ (2010:253). When the natural world no longer exists within elegy as a means of analogising the “real” lost object, and, instead, becomes itself this lost object as in the case of ecological elegy, such elegists face the dilemma of having to elegise without the form’s traditional recourse to use the environment as its stage, ‘sounding board’ and ‘echo chamber for the narrator’s cries of loss’ (2010:253). In this way, Morton describes ecological elegy as ‘los[ing] the objective correlative for loss itself’ (2010:253), and thus estranged from the mourning process, propelled instead into a movement of melancholia.

Considering the complex history of the term “melancholia” in psychiatric and cultural discourse, any useful application of the term in theorising a viable poetics of writing requires more delimitation, however, than Morton provides.
Consequently, the question of how Morton’s melancholic mourning, as a literary mode of reckoning with environmental destruction, intersects with, appropriates or diverges from melancholic mourning as an involuntary and diagnosable psychological state of grief following bereavement, or from the melancholic form of biological depression, is largely left to speculation in his account. Certainly, Morton’s argument that an ethical eco-elegy must depart from a traditional mode of elegiac mourning in favour of melancholia reiterates a long-standing psychoanalytic understanding, grounded in Freud’s early work on mourning, which places “healthy” mourning in opposition to “pathological” melancholia, rather than treating these processes as divergent yet coinciding points in a continuum. Additionally, Morton seems to take for granted that, at least in traditional or non-ecological elegy, a “successful”, non-melancholic movement of mourning, as a process with an end point, is possible, an assumption that Derrida (most notably) has carefully undermined in works such as Memoires: for Paul de Man (1986). In this vein, Morton references the pioneering elegy theorist Peter Sacks, whose work The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats (1985) is grounded in a traditional subject-centred Freudian understanding of mourning, in which elegy enacts a movement geared toward consolation for loss. Paraphrasing Sacks (1985), Morton writes of non-ecological elegy that ‘[n]ature becomes an analogue for the objectifying process of writing, which detaches our grief from us and makes it bearable by negating it’ (2010:253). Certainly, such a movement, grounded in the troping and substitution of the lost other in seeking consolation for grief, has long characterised the elegiac tradition. In describing bereaved Apollo’s “turning” from the object of his love [Daphne] to a sign of her [a laurel wreath]’, Sacks argues that Apollo is a ‘successful mourner’, finding a consoling substitute for his lost love (1987:5; 6). Suggests Sacks, ‘[i]t is this substitutive turn or act of troping that any mourner must perform’ (1987:5). However, this understanding of elegy as a consolatory process of working through grief to arrive at a sense of closure has been challenged by consequent research in the field, notably by Jahan Ramazani (1994), who posits that modern elegy in fact actively resists such closure, being compelled to keep the very wounds open that traditional elegists and critics such as Sacks (following from Freud’s early mourning theory), would have it help to heal. Ramazani’s suggestion that modern
elegiac writing forestalls such closure resonates in Paul Auster’s observation, in writing of his dead father, that ‘the act of writing has kept this wound open’ (2012:34). In the movement of twentieth century elegy, Ramazani identifies a fundamental shift from “compensatory” mourning to ‘melancholic mourning’ in which ‘the modern elegist tends not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss’ (1994:xi). More recently, R. Clifton Spargo (2004) has posited the non-consolatory movement of melancholic mourning as an integral feature of ethical mourning in the elegiac tradition. For Spargo, ‘melancholia interrogates the symbolic social structures that contain and reduce the meaning of the other who is being lamented’ (2004:11). In resisting traditional elegiac forms of closure and consolation, Spargo suggests that ‘the depressive meanings of melancholia insist upon the other’s un cancellable and unassimilable value’ (2004:13). As such, Spargo contends that ‘a resistant and incomplete mourning stands for an ethical acknowledgment of—or perhaps a ceding to—the radical alterity of the other whom one mourns’ (2004:13). Just as Ramazani and Spargo, without engaging with ecological elegy, have already identified melancholic mourning as a movement in operation within modern elegy generally (across a range of traditional and less-traditional elegiac subjects), so is Morton’s general notion of melancholic mourning already emergent in much contemporary ecological writing—especially in the sense of a more pervasive melancholic “tone” in prose18, and also in the recent work of elegists such as Peter Reading19 and Juliana Spahr—although, regrettably, the only elegy Morton’s essay explores is Shelley’s 1816 Alastor.

Aside from its history as a loaded signifier in psychiatric discourse, the words “melancholia” and “melancholy” are inflected also with the historical significance of various cultural and artistic movements—including the Elizabethan cult of melancholy in 17th century England (epitomised by Shakespeare’s 1603 Hamlet, to which Morton refers); Sturm und Drang in 18th century Germany (exemplified


19 For another discussion within the emergent but currently sparse field of eco-elegy, see Iain Twiddy’s “‘Routine Periodic Faunal Extinctions’: Peter Reading’s Ecological Elegies” in Pastoral Elegy in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry (2012).
by Goethe’s 1774 *The Sorrows of Young Werther*); and Romanticism in 18th and 19th century Europe and America (a pertinent text of which is Keats’s 1820 ‘Ode on Melancholy’). Importantly, the aestheticisation of melancholy within these movements was predicated on a contemplative distance between a rather self-conscious observing subject and a melancholic object pertaining to death (be it a graveyard, a skull, an historical or mythological tragedy, or the dead themselves). Attesting to the prominence which melancholy reached, as an aesthetic experience strangely merging grief and pleasure, at the height of European Romanticism is Joseph Severn’s 1821 letter to William Haslam when he describes the restorative experience of visiting his friend Keats’s grave in Rome, as a ‘romantic spot’ inspiring in him ‘a most delicious melancholy which on many occasions has relieved my low spirits’ (2002:513). As an aesthetic experience predicated on a distance between subject and object, Romantic melancholy is also linked to the sublime, involving the rather self-conscious enjoyment of wild nature, or ruined, desolate landscapes devoid of people—as a spectacle to be regarded from a safe distance. This rich history with which any literary appropriation of melancholia is inflected sits in uncertain relation to Morton’s argument. On the one hand, the complicity of the Romantic strain of melancholia with the sublime would seem to be at odds with Morton’s argument that we be suspicious of the privileged vantage point that allows for such titillating objectification of the other, and positioning of “nature” as being “over there”. On the other hand, such a melancholic aesthetic as it is seen in the art of this period could also be interpreted as an exploration of our desire for and enjoyment of death, and the dark side of nature and as such could align with Morton’s argument.

Undoubtedly, the concept of melancholic mourning as an elegiac mode which would resist a movement of “making grief bearable” and instead “keep the wound open”, is a highly relevant consideration in developing an ethical poetics of elegy. However, Morton’s presentation of this concept is confusing and misleading not only in its neglect to define his application of melancholic mourning as a historically loaded term, but in its implication that a melancholic mode would constitute a *new* means of ethically approaching the unique demands of ecological elegy. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, in fact, across both poetry and prose, there exist already varied examples of elegiac literature which reckons
with foregone, in-process and impending ecological loss in a negative and non-consolatory (or “melancholic”) mode.

Deep v.s. dark ecology

Just as Cronon’s critique of wilderness attempts to redress underlying problems in environmentalist attitudes toward nature that paradoxically undermine their urgent objectives, Morton’s proposed “dark ecological” melancholy is presented as a counter to attitudes and practices espoused within ‘deep green elegy’, ‘ecocriticism’ and ‘deep ecology’. In enacting a movement that ‘kills nature for a second time, before it has fully happened for the first time’, in order to mourn nature ‘too hastily’, Morton argues that ‘[d]eep green elegy’ constitutes a ‘narcissistic panic’ and ‘unseemly rhetorical rush’—a totalising movement that in its terminal outlook skips over the moment of loss in pursuit of the absolute end (2010:255). By rushing to imagine this end, this movement, Morton suggests, negates, overruns or ‘fails fully to account’, and supposedly to fully make felt, the singular losses of ‘species and environments’ happening now (2010:255). That is, by attempting to deal with the totality of ecological crisis, deep green elegy fails to reckon with and evoke the singular instances of loss that constitute the totality. While this is an important point, the opposition Morton presents between the mourning of deep ecology and the proposed melancholy of his own “dark ecology” not only perpetuates the false dichotomy of Freudian mourning (as noted above), but misrepresents deep ecological thinking, which has much more in common with Morton’s melancholic dark ecology than his vague references to it suggest.

In speculating about how a melancholic eco-elegiac mode might be characterised, Morton posits the possibility of a ‘Hamlet-like lingering in melancholy’ that:
(…) would open up a philosophical and aesthetic space for the arrival of non-identity. It would be an attunement, an allowing of the object to stick in our throats—an acknowledgement that ‘nature’ is not lost (2010:255).

Morton is speaking here not about the content but the form of ecological poetry, for we are also in the process of losing ‘our habitual point of view’ founded on ‘distance’, whereby ‘we are here and nature is ‘yonder’’ (2010:256). He posits that:

[a]ttention to form would open a space for a politicized melancholy—a presence to the idea that something is happening, right now, not at some impossible future date. We could refuse to swallow the planet, metaphorically as well as literally (2010:255).

This subject-object model of nature is of course a condition of traditional sublime experience of the kind that privileged (predominantly male European) Romantic sensibilities were able to celebrate—crucially, at a distance from the object of that experience. Morton proposes that it is in fact the loss of the conditions which created this narrative position that eco-elegy mourns for, and that:

[t]he really difficult elegiac work would consist in bringing into full consciousness the reality of human and nonhuman interdependence, in a manner that threatens the comfortable way in which humans appear in the foreground and everything else in the background (2010:256).

This reality of the interdependence of beings which truly radical ecological elegy would presumably make “felt” is at the heart of what Morton calls ‘the ecological thought’ 20, a thought which also turns upon the concept and experience of intimacy and sentience (2010:257), in our relation to the other and to others. Morton emphasises that ‘[i]ntimacy involves closeness with beings who may or may not be sentient’ and foregrounds the dangerous ambiguity of sentience as a category of being when it is impossible to truly “know” an other, precisely because they are other (2010:257). As a ‘symptomatic text’ for considering the interception of elegy and ecology/nature, Morton analyses Shelley’s ‘radically ecological’ elegy Alastor, which for him:

20 Morton’s concept of “the ecological thought” is expanded in The Ecological Thought (2012).
Morton discusses *Alastor* as performing an ambivalent kind of elegiac erosion of the aesthetic distance that perpetuates dualistic thinking about nature, through such oppositional pairings such as ‘subject and object’, ‘subject and subject’ and ‘subject and abject’ (2010:264). Further, Morton views Shelley’s text as working in a variety of ways to insidiously trouble the borders between such categories as self and other, life and death, animate and inanimate, natural and unnatural, human and inhuman, inside and outside, known and unknown, and desire and disgust. Ways in which Morton recognises the elegy as achieving this include the subtle use of ‘untagged indirect speech’; an ambiguous narrative structure of multiple narrators; and placing the reader in the uncomfortable position of identification with the dead poet, implicating them in the poem’s own “devouring” of its dead subject, and consequent flourishing in lush imagery in its own afterlife (2010:260; 261-4).

Morton presents melancholia as ‘more ethically refined than mourning’, contrasting the two states as, respectively, ‘letting the dead stick in our throat’ and ‘allowing them to be digested’ (2010:267). In this elegiac mode of melancholia, we would linger in the disturbing and uncertain ecological reality of “how things are” right now, rather than endlessly pre-empting apocalypse—no matter how likely it may seem. In advancing his argument for a melancholic mode of eco-elegy that envisions what Morton calls a “dark ecology”, Morton rather misleadingly locates this mode as being in opposition to the principles and practices espoused by deep ecology. The distinction drawn by Morton between deep ecological thinking and that of his proposed dark ecology is undermined by the fact that some figures considered central to deep ecology and its literature/poetics, notably Gary Snyder, have long exercised grave suspicions about the human idealisation and aestheticisation of “nature”, and advocated for modes of subversion corresponding to many of which Morton speaks.

Morton argues against what he views as a tendency, within deep ecology, to ‘eras[e] the difference between consciousness and the world, or between subject
and object’ in order to ‘make ecological social practices inevitable’ (2010:267). Instead, through his reading of Shelley’s *Alastor*, Morton asserts that:

> [t]ruly to love nature, not as a mirror of our mind, but as sheer otherness, would be to love what is least subjective about it. It would be to fall in love with the dead. To be fully ethical, then, is to admit to the perversity of our desire (2010:267).

This acknowledgement and love of a nature beyond the pristine ideal, then, is what constitutes Morton’s dark ecology, whereby we embrace the unseemly, the abject and the rotting, the dead, the non-pastoral, the wild and the artificial in nature—and own our desires for this “dark side” of nature. However, as demonstrated in Snyder’s ‘Unnatural Writing’, a highly relevant essay originally presented as a talk in 1992 and published in 1995, this opposition between deep ecology and Morton’s dark ecology represents a rather blasé totalisation of the former. Like Morton, Snyder criticizes the historical privileging in Western art and thought of human civilization in binary opposition to the “wild”, and consequent overlooking of our own implication in the ecosystem. Diverging from Morton, he suggests that this mutual implication also relates to the way:

>(…) that consciousness, mind, imagination, and language are fundamentally wild. “Wild” as in wild ecosystems—richly interconnected, interdependent, and incredibly complex (2008:168).

Such an assertion of an ecological congruence of structure within human cognition and creation, however, is hardly equivalent to Morton’s reductive notion of deep ecology’s ‘erasing the difference between consciousness and the world’ (2010:267). Turning to the issue of artistic practice, Snyder suggests that an:

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21 However, because this argument is inadequately qualified, it also lends itself to interpretations contradictory to Morton’s own thesis—there is a tone here that could be interpreted as irresponsible, if not sadistic or apocalyptic. It is one thing to resist the aestheticisation of nature as an ideal form, and another to embrace the very signs of ecology’s degradation, diminishment and consumption by a radically out of control human population.

22 Which, it must be said, contains a brief misreading of deconstruction that does not concern this discussion.
“(…) “art of the wild” is to see art in the context of the process of nature—nature as process rather than as product or commodity—because “wild” is a name for the way that phenomena continually actualize themselves. Seeing this also serves to acknowledge the autonomy and integrity of the nonhuman part of the world, an “Other” that we are barely beginning to be able to know (2008:168).

Here, Snyder echoes many voices in deep ecology in seeking for a balance between realising the proximity with which we exist in the environment with other beings, and preserving the distance necessary to respect and celebrate the alterity and difference of those other beings. On a practical level, Snyder suggests that the practice of such a “wild” or “unnatural” writing could entail a profound re-envisioning of traditional “nature writing”, and open the possibility for a writing which in its readiness to mindfully traverse beyond the intra-human familiar, is surprising, paradoxical and transgressive. In its embrace of eco-, bio- and narrative diversity, such a writing may be ‘irreverent, inharmonious, ugly, frazzled, unpredictable, simple, and clear—or virtually inaccessible’ (2008:169).

Writes Snyder, ‘[w]ho will write of the odd barbed, hooked, bent, splayed, and crooked penises of nonhuman male creatures? Of sexism among spiders?’ (2008:169) Such sentiments reveal the thinking of a major proponent of deep ecology to be intrinsically aligned with Morton’s dark ecology, an inconsistency not addressed in Morton’s criticism of deep ecological thinking and which thus confuses his presentation of dark ecology as an alternative paradigm. In the following passage, for instance, Snyder’s promotion of a poetics of deep ecology sounds very similar to Morton’s dark ecology, in espousing for a scrutiny and honouring of the wild, dark, abject side of a non-ideal nature which we exist within and which exists within us, in connection to non-human systems, beings and organisms who also have agency:

I like to imagine a “depth ecology” that would go to the dark side of nature—the ball of crunched bones in a scat, the feathers in the snow, the tales of insatiable appetite. Wild systems…can also be seen as irrational, moldy, cruel, parasitic (…) Life is not just diurnal and a property of large interesting vertebrates, it is also nocturnal, anaerobic, cannibalistic, microscopic, digestive, fermentative: cooking away in the warm dark (…) there is a world of nature on the decay side, a world of beings who do rot and decay in the shade (2008:170).
Snyder here precedes Morton’s argument for a rethinking of, as Morton writes, ‘nature [as] radically different, irreducibly strange, threatening our need for coherence, for a background that constitutes a human foreground’, and for the embracing of ‘our necrophiliac enjoyment of sheer nature, teeming and rotting’ (2010:265). This is at odds with Morton’s assertion that ‘[d]eep ecology is not deep enough, because it eschews the dead in favour of the living’ (2010:267). Snyder even references elegy in invoking Orpheus—alongside Izanagi, a figure in Japanese Shinto-mythology who also failed to retrieve his wife from the underworld, and Coyote Man, a mercurial trickster figure in Native American lore:

The other side of the “sacred” is the sight of your beloved in the underworld, dripping with maggots. Coyote, Orpheus, and Izanagi cannot help but look, and they lose her. Shame, grief, embarrassment, and fear are the anaerobic fuels of the dark imagination (2008:170).

Further, Snyder makes the radical and reflexive observation that when considered as a kind of “leaving”, literature is not limited to human civilization, but finds different form in the lives of other creatures:

Narrative in the deer world is a track of scents that is passed on from deer to deer, with an art of interpretation which is instinctive. A literature of blood-stains, a bit of piss, a whiff of estrus, a hit of rut, a scrape on a sapling, and long gone (2008:170).

Through such observations, which speak to the profound way in which any thinking of ecology must itself reflect the strange, complex and non-ideal reality of—at once—our implication with other-than-humans and their difference from us, Snyder demonstrates an intense understanding of the vacillation between intimacy and difference in relation to the other which Morton’s ethics foreground. Snyder’s sentiments in this essay also align with Val Plumwood’s more recent suggestion that ‘we need to spread concepts of agency and creativity more widely into what we have thought of as the dead world of nature’ (2009:online).
Finally, Snyder offers some practical suggestions for conceiving of a “New Nature Poetics” of writing wild, unnatural nature, such that ‘has the potential of becoming the most vital, radical, fluid, transgressive, pansexual, subductive, and morally challenging kind of writing on the scene’ and perhaps of figuring in the struggle to prevent ecological destruction (2008:171). Snyder suggests that such a writing be both ‘nature literate’ and ‘place literate’ (2008:171). That is, such a writing should demonstrate a mindfulness of ‘who’s who and what’s what in the ecosystem’, of ‘local specifics on both ecological-biotic and socio-political levels’ and of ‘social and environmental history’—even when the presence of these aspects are not overt in the writing (2008:171). Snyder also suggests the use of Coyote and Bear ‘as totem[s]’ for the respective qualities of being ‘open’ and ‘shape shifting’, and ‘omnivorous, fearless, without anxiety, steady, generous, contemplative, and relentlessly protective of the wild’ (2008:171). Coyote, additionally, is a totem for ‘providing the eye of other beings going in and out of death’ and ‘laughing with the dark side’ (2008:171). Snyder also advocates that writers ‘find further totems’, and ‘study mind and language—language as wild system, mind as wild habitat, world as a “making” (poem), poem as a creature of the wild mind’ (2008:172). Moreover, he suggests we engage with science and explore new limits, moving ‘beyond nature literacy into the emergent new territories in science: landscape ecology, conservation biology, charming chaos, complicated systems theory’, and ‘into an awareness of the problematic and contingent aspects of so-called objectivity’ (2008:172). What is Snyder demonstrating and calling for here other than Morton’s own ‘ecological thought’, ‘the thinking of the interconnectedness of all beings, in the most profound possible way’, which embraces ‘the unnatural within nature itself’? (Morton 2010:257; 263). In light of the work of deep ecologists such as Snyder, it seems misguided to establish the way forward for ethical eco-elegy as a trajectory in opposition to deep ecology as an entire movement, as Morton might be seen to imply.

While his application of melancholia as a central term demands greater qualification, and his argument is placed in a problematically vague opposition to deep ecology, Morton’s efforts to delineate a mode of ethically approaching the confounding phenomenon of ecological mourning within elegy offer a fertile ground for further discussion in an emergent area within elegy studies (and
beyond). However, in his vision of ethical eco-elegy as embracing representations of nature as a dystopic, yet interconnected, uncanny, the fate of which remains “undetermined”, Morton’s essay shies dangerously from the fact of the climate transformation that is now upon us and set to gravely alter the balance of our global ecologies and the lives that depend on them. In this vision, Morton also shies from the fact of our human culpability as a powerful and destructive force on a critically endangered planet, and the need of literature to engage with and answer to the unspeakable loss that has occurred, is occurring, and is due to occur in the near future, even if radical action is taken. Implied in the enormous agency of humans in altering our planet’s ecological and biospheric systems, is surely a correspondingly enormous responsibility. Ultimately, Morton’s appeals for a greater literary consciousness of our human interrelation with other organisms within a shared planetary ecosystem neglects to adequately emphasise our human responsibility and implication in this planetary crisis. While Morton is wise to consider the dangers of elegy (unfairly represented as uniformly “deep green”) that rushes to depict the future of the ecological crisis we are heading toward, at the expense of attending to and feeling the real and singular loss that is in progress, it is all too simple to espouse as an alternative a supposed melancholic elegiac mode that allows for a focus on a crisis that is in-progress, where ‘nothing is determined yet’ (2010:255). It is to smear over the difficulty elegists face in reckoning with the untotalisable enormity of a loss which scientists themselves advise us, in elegiac terms and with ever-increasing urgency, that we are rollicking toward with the recklessness of the Titanic. It is to deny such a spectre, in not having happened yet, as eliciting real emotions of grief and loss demanding of an elegiac literary reckoning, despite the formal and ethical complications of incipient loss as an elegiac subject/object. The spectre of an apocalyptic near future is real because the scientific data attests to such a future being exactly what we are wagering, with each day of political inaction. Not only is the ecological threat an obvious vehicle for powerful elegiac writing—elegy as a traditional mode of literary mourning is an understandable recourse for writers who feel

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23 Our continued tendency as humans to view ourselves, in various ways, as exceptional to non-human others is a growing area of critical enquiry, encompassing animal studies, to which
deeply the loss that has occurred and the loss that seems inevitably to come, and whose writing instinctively follows the grain of what is a melancholy and painful preoccupation. In this context it seems implausible that we would ‘transcend the elegiac mode’. Morton’s ‘lingering in melancholy’ is itself bound to this mode, no matter how much celebration of dark, unseemly “necrophiliac” desire it includes. Rather, it would seem useful to rethink the elegiac mode, and in doing so, to refine our ideas about how we as writers might conceive of ecological elegy as a responsible relation to otherness in the face of both eco-loss and impending eco-loss. This would involve the foregrounding of many of the qualities discussed by Cronon, Snyder and Morton alike in thinking the ecological other in relation to ourselves while respecting the other’s singularity—qualities including interdependence, intimacy, exchange, distance and proximity, and care. Such a rethinking of the ways in which writers might write about ecology must acknowledge at once the place of mourning as a natural response to real loss, and the necessity of approaching mourning in such a way as to be mindful of its potential for violence to the other and for the perpetuation of the kinds of thinking about nature that will abate progress.

Perhaps the most useful insight emphasised by Morton in the context of eco-elegy concerns the paradoxical need to at once contract and preserve distance in our relations with the other-than-humans and otherness constituting our ecological systems, in order for these relations to be grounded in not only intimacy but respect for radical, unknowable alterity. In doing so, Morton echoes not only Cronon and Plumwood, in relation to environmental ethics, but Watkin speaking of ethical elegy more generally (via Bowlby), in relation to a metonymic relation to the lost other of ‘proxim[ity] but separate[ness]’ (2004:165). However, as will be shown in the next chapter, it is in Derrida’s work on mourning that we find these concepts integrated within an intricate metonymic framework that comes closer to accounting for the complexity, paradox and difficulty of reckoning ethically with a lost other, with which we are interconnected.

Derrida’s late works contribute. See, for example, The Animal That Therefore I Am (2008) and The Beast and the Sovereign, Volumes I and II (2011).
Toward an ethical poetics of eco-elegy

...everything is at stake in the decision of the gaze.

– Maurice Blanchot, ‘The Gaze of Orpheus’

The young English corpse was everyone and it was also he alone. It was everyone and he. But “everyone” does not make you cry.

– Marguerite Duras, ‘The Death of the Young British Pilot’, in Writing

In rethinking the elegiac mode in application to the unique demands of ecological loss, Morton has asserted the potential of a “melancholic” mode of mourning that would linger in the darkness and difficulty of this contingent moment in our ecological crisis. By refusing to rush on to imagine an eco-apocalypse that hasn’t yet happened, Morton suggests that such a mode would sidestep the ‘sadism’ of traditional elegy (2010:255). However, this chapter contends that any poetics espousing a movement of melancholic mourning must attend to Derrida’s rigorous rethinking of the Freudian dichotomy between melancholic or pathological mourning, and “healthy” mourning. In grappling, via Morton and others, toward an ethical poetics of eco-elegy that eschews problematic dichotomising, this chapter examines Derrida’s metonymic conception of ethical mourning and commemoration for the other as a paradoxically impossible, unending and yet necessary co-movement of both introjection (“healthy” mourning) and incorporation (melancholic mourning) as an opportunity to complicate and refine
existing attempts to outline the possibilities of an ethical eco-elegiac mode.

Moreover, Derrida’s understanding of mourning, as both a metonymic relation to the dead other and as a law of living friendship, offers a compass by which to orient a more nuanced thinking of what an ethical poetics of writing ecological elegy might constitute for a loss that is not always forgone, but rather “in-process” or incipient. Drawing from Derrida’s work with reference to Barthes’s elegiac metonymy of the punctum, this chapter argues that such a poetics would involve an attitude of witness, in which the singularity and agency of the ecological other is recognised (distance), at the same moment as we recognise that in being answerable to ecology we are also answerable to ourselves (intimacy). In addition, I suggest that such a poetics would recognise that the movement enacted by eco-elegy is at once necessary, and completely unequal to its task—confounded by the enormity of a loss that cannot be measured, and by a reckoning that is without end. This is a movement of mourning in which is inscribed not only our responsibility to the dead other, but also to the living; encompassing a mourning not only of absolute loss, but of loss that is contingent, incipient, in progress, and partial. Such a conception of mourning comes closer to accounting for the divergent forms of eco-loss, all of which (in their comparatively recent emergence into socio-political and cultural consciousness) demand our attention and responsibility. In making this argument, I suggest a tentative allegory for the writing of ecological loss, consisting of an Orpheus who resists the urge to turn away from Eurydice, and instead meets her gaze.

I.
The other in us: Derrida’s metonymy of ethical mourning

Impossible mourning & the law of friendship
As is commonly understood, we mourn for those to whom we have a relation. In fact, it may be more precise to say that it is the loss of this living relation, between ourselves and an other alive in the world, which we mourn when that other dies, and we are left alone with only our memories of them. The contingency of much ecological loss that is in-process and incipient, however, demands a means of encompassing mourning as a felt experience (and literary movement) beyond the absolute loss of physical death. Derrida’s articulation of mourning as a condition and responsibility that is not limited to death, but which exists as a living law of friendship, provides a means of considering this contingency of ecological loss, in relation to the sentiments of mourning and grief which are driving the emergent literature of eco-elegy. It is with this concept of a mourning preceding total loss, or what Derrida has called ‘[t]he anguished apprehension of mourning’, which anticipates the loss of relation to the still-living friend, that the tentative suggestions of this chapter are ultimately inflected. However, before discussing further Derrida’s conception of mourning in friendship, it is necessary to examine his understanding of mourning as a metonymic structure that confounds commonly applied distinctions between healthy mourning and melancholia—as instituted by Freud and perpetuated by Morton. As a paradoxical negotiation between both introjection (Freudian “healthy” mourning) and incorporation (Freudian “pathological” melancholia), Derridean mourning undermines the illusory Freudian split between these movements, insisting that the only choice of the faithful mourner is to try to redress one infidelity with another in an impossible effort to, at most, ‘fail well’ (Derrida, 2001:144, original emphasis). Derridean mourning thus challenges any unqualified suggestion that a singularly “melancholic” mode of commemorative mourning is possible, let alone more ethical, and thus offers a more rigorous, if unsettling, framework in which to refine an ethics of writing eco-loss.

Beyond its prosaic employment as a synonym for general sadness, and as it pertains to the complex psychological processes of mourning, “melancholia” is a rich site of overlapping and contested meanings. Since Freud’s seminal essay ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1917) opposed melancholic mourning to so-called “healthy mourning”, psychoanalysts from Klein and Lacan, to Bowlby and
Kristeva have offered their own theories regarding the causes and characteristics of melancholic mourning, while the concept has also influenced literary criticism, in work such as Morton’s. According to Freud, both mourning and melancholia are ‘reaction[s] to the real loss of a love object’, defined chiefly by the prevalence in melancholia of a ‘disturbance of self-regard’ (Freud, 1917:250; 244). Moreover, while both conditions involve features such as ‘painful dejection’ and ‘inhibition of all activity’, mourning is understood by Freud as a means to an endpoint of the mourner’s detachment and disinvestment from the lost love object, whereby ‘the work of mourning is completed’ and ‘the ego becomes free and uninhibited again’ so that normal life might resume (Freud, 1917: 245). In order to arrive at this point, the mourner, through ‘[r]eality-testing’, realises ‘that the love object no longer exists’, and gradually withdraws their libido ‘from its attachments to that object’ (Freud, 1917:244). This withdrawal is accomplished via introjection, a process whereby:

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\text{[e]ach single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hyper-cathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it (Freud, 1917:245).}
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Freudian melancholia, on the other hand, is deemed pathological to the extent that the subject fails to release their ego from the inhibition of libidinal attachment to the lost object, and resume “normal” life. The melancholic, unlike the mourner, then fails to ‘overcome’ loss, ‘after a certain lapse of time’ (Freud, 1917:244). Moreover, unlike mourning, melancholia is often associated with ‘loss of a more ideal kind’ (loss not contingent on actual death), or a loss which the subject feels deeply yet the nature (or possibly object) of which they struggle to define (Freud, 1917:245). In this way, Freud suggests that in contrast to mourning, melancholia is ‘related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness’ (1917:245). Moreover, Freudian melancholia is marked by an extreme lowering of self-esteem, a wounding of the ego leading to self-reproach, and a remarkable resistance to the instincts of self-preservation (1917:246). Suggests Freud, ‘[i]n mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (1917:246). Instead of successfully introjecting the object to free the ego to form new attachments, the melancholic undergoes a narcissistic
identification with the lost object, a movement from ‘object-loss’ to ‘ego-loss’, a loss of self (Freud, 1917:249). Rather than turning toward new objects, the ego takes the lost object into itself, absorbing or “cannibalising” the object—the process of incorporation (Freud, 1917:249).

The mourning theory outlined in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ has deeply influenced the framework through which psychoanalysts and other thinkers, including literary theorists and creative writers, have understood loss and mourning, particularly as experiences focused on the subject rather than the lost other, on ends rather than a resistance to ends, and on consolation and substitution rather than on continued attachments. However, as Tammy Clewell (2004) has astutely argued, the mourning theory outlined in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ must be understood in light of Freud’s later 1923 work, The Ego and the Id, which significantly complicates his prior distinction between mourning and melancholia. As has been discussed, in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, Freud distinguishes the melancholic by means of their prolonged identification with the lost other, and incorporation of the lost other within the self, precipitating conflicting emotions of love and hate for the lost other, which are turned in upon the melancholic’s own self. By contrast, in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, the mourner, by relinquishing the lost other, frees the ego to form new attachments, thereby concluding the mourning process and regaining psychic health. However, in The Ego and the Id, Freud quite radically revises this earlier theory by contending that the process of incorporating the lost other within the grieving self, previously seen as defining melancholia or pathological mourning, in fact constitutes, quotes Clewell (2004:61), ‘the sole condition under which the id can give up its objects’ (Freud, 1923:29). That is, Freud here suggests that melancholic incorporation is ultimately a process integral to the formation of subjectivity, and to any process of mourning loss, “healthy”, “pathological”, or otherwise. This transformed understanding of mourning is evident in a later 1929 letter to a bereaved friend24, in which Freud reflects upon his daughter’s death, and affirms that ultimately, as mourners, ‘we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute’ for the being we have lost (1960:386). Indeed, Clewell argues that Freud’s late understanding of

24 This letter, to Ludwig Binswanger, is referenced by both Clewell (2004:61-2) and Bowlby (1980:23).
mourning, in suggesting that ‘there can be no final severance of attachments without dissolving the ego’, offers a means by which ‘the mourning subject may affirm the endurance of ambivalent bonds to those loved and lost others as a condition of its own existence’ (2004:65). In understanding the ego as constitutive of the subject’s experience of loss, or as an ‘elegiac formation’, Clewell contends that this late theory ‘raises the possibility for thinking about mourning as an affirmative and loving internalization of the lost other’ (2004:64). As such, Clewell proposes that:

Freud’s work on mourning helps us, finally, to establish an intimate, indeed ethical, relation between past and future as we embark on the present work of endless mourning (2004:65).

While, as Clewell demonstrates, it is important to contextualise any discussion of Freud’s early mourning theory in light of his later theory, the focus of this essay on the distinction between introjection and incorporation (and identification) as outlined in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, is guided precisely by the influence of this theory (beyond any subsequent ones) on the application of mourning and melancholia by thinkers such as Sacks (1985), Ramazani (1994), and Morton (2010), to elegiac literature. Moreover, despite Freud’s eventual recognition of the integral nature of interiorising the lost other to both mourning and subjectivity, he does not, as Clewell notes, ‘explicitly define identification as a positive incorporation of the lost other’ (2004:63). While ‘The Ego and the Id’ demonstrates an understanding of mourning far more nuanced and attentive to the demands of the lost other upon the mourner than Freud is often acknowledged for, at the same time its focus on identification (or incorporation) ignores the equal importance of introjection in mourning the lost other. Moreover, as Bowlby notes, the preoccupation of Freud and many other psychoanalysts with identification ignores the vital importance to mourning of the subject’s ‘striving to recover the lost person’, a striving contextualised by Bowlby’s attachment theory, as explained in Chapter 1 (1980:30).

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25 Kristeva’s application of melancholia to literature in *Black Sun* (1987), which draws heavily from and also diverges from Freud, does reference *The Ego and the Id*.
By contrast, what Derrida offers in his 1986 *Memoires for Paul de Man* (itself an elegiac text written in reflection of his friend de Man’s death) and in his essay ‘Fors: The Anglish Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’\(^{26}\) (1977) is a profound consideration of the paradoxical co-movement of both introjection and incorporation implicated in mourning a loved other, the necessary impossibility of “successful” mourning, and the question of how to answer to our responsibility to the other when we mourn. Thus Derrida complicates both Freudian and post-Freudian distinctions between the “healthy” process of introjection and the “pathological” process of incorporation, questioning the ethics and foregrounding the ethical necessity of each, insisting that both figure in any effort to ethically mourn the other “in us”, an effort which in any case cannot succeed. As he notes in ‘Fors’: ‘Introjection/incorporation: everything is played out on the borderline which divides and opposes the two terms’ (1977:70). It is useful here to draw from this essay’s more analytical discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of introjection and incorporation in defining these terms. Introjection, as Derrida notes, is a theory formulated in 1909 by Sándor Ferenczi and appropriated by Freud and others, for a process whereby an image of an external object (generally comprising a selection of external and behavioural characteristics) is taken inside the self and assimilated into the mourner’s subjectivity, in order to ultimately be cathartically expelled so that the subject can move on. This narcissistic inclusion of (the image of) the other within of the self ‘expands the self’ (1977:70). As Derrida emphasises, psychoanalyst Maria Torok subjects the theory to an important reformulation when she notes that it is ‘not only the object but also the instincts and desires attached to it’ that are introjected, while also asserting the difference of the two terms which have historically been blurred (1977:70).

The process of incorporation as defined by Freud involves the subject’s narcissistic identification with the lost object and its taking in of the object as a discrete and separate being preserved within the self. This process of ‘[s]ealing the loss of the object, but also marking the refusal to mourn’, explains Derrida, ‘is foreign to and actually opposed to the process of introjection’ (1977:71). By contrast, in introjection:

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\(^{26}\) Hereafter abbreviated to ‘Fors’.
I pretend to keep the dead alive, intact, *safe (save) inside me*, but it is only in order to refuse, in a necessarily equivocal way, to love the dead as a living part of me, dead *save in me* (1977:71, emphases in original).

In this way, Derrida presents introjection or “normative” mourning as a movement whereby the mourner denies the other entry into their self as a discrete living being, and incorporation as paradoxically a means of permitting the other some means of living on within the body of the bereaved (1977:71). For Derrida, contrary to Freud’s logic, in incorporation, the “sealing off” of the other as a separate entity inside the mourner’s self resists the cannibalistic assimilation and appropriation by the mourner of gestures and traits of the deceased involved in introjection, and in doing so preserves for the other a greater degree of alterity, inasmuch as the other who is no longer alive “save in me” retains alterity. As will be seen, however, neither introjection nor incorporation are able to circumvent a degree of violence to or betrayal of the other’s alterity, to the other as other, a fact which underwrites Derrida’s suspicion of whether true mourning is even possible, despite his insistence that we must try regardless.

*Memoires: for Paul de Man* proceeds from a similarly paradoxical and negative logic in questioning the nature of mourning as it pertains to memory and to ‘the other in us’, asking ‘where is the most unjust betrayal?’ (1986:6). In expanding from this question Derrida delineates introjection and incorporation as different forms of infidelity to the other arising from the interiorisation of the other within the living subject:

> Is the most distressing, or even the most deadly infidelity that of a possible mourning which would interiorize within us the image, idol, or ideal of the other who is dead and lives only in us? Or is it that of the impossible mourning, which, leaving the other his alterity, respecting thus his infinite remove, either refuses to take or is incapable of taking the other within oneself, as in the tomb or the vault of some narcissism? (1986:6)

This reframing of the question of mourning to encompass the ethical demands of the dead other upon the mourner represents a transgressive departure from the traditional subject-oriented and end-based psychoanalytical focus upon mourning
as a means by which the subject either overcomes loss successfully and “completes” mourning, or else becomes arrested in a pathological state of melancholic mourning in need of clinical redress. In referring to the ‘other in us’, Derrida emphasises that, being dead, this ‘other living in us’ is distinctly ‘not living in himself’ and that our hosting of him within our:

(...) bereaved memory, can be neither the so-called resurrection of the other himself (...) nor the simple inclusion of a narcissistic fantasy in a subjectivity that is closed upon itself or even identical to itself (1986:21).

Elaborating further, he notes that this being who no longer exists in himself except as a ‘being-in-us’ also exists as a being ‘between us’ (1986:28), suggesting a bereaved subjectivity at once divided from and interconnected with the other. Of this other, Derrida writes:

He lives only in us. But we are never ourselves, and between us, identical to us, a “self” is never in itself or identical to itself (1986:28).

Further, for Derrida, speaking now more generally of the condition that structures his understanding of friendship, yet which might also structure relations of love or hospitality, ‘the possibility of the death of the other as mine or ours in-forms any relation to the other and the finitude of memory’ (1986:33). That is, the knowledge that the other might die before us, and that we, surviving them, might be responsible for their remembrance, is always already inscribed into our relation to the other before their death. However, it is important to note Derrida’s distinction that the other does not come to live “in” or “between us” in bereaved memory until the event of their death, ‘or at least in the anticipated possibility of a death’, for death defines the possibility of the other’s “being in” the mourner, ‘harbour[ed]’ as ‘something that is greater and other than them; something outside of them within them’ (1986:33; 34, emphasis in original). When we lose the other, we turn to our memory of them, revealed in its ‘finitude’ now that the other is

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27 To avoid confusion, I have herein either followed Derrida’s routine use of the masculine generic pronoun, or else used the gender neutral “they” or “their”.

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gone, and move to interiorize the other through this memory. This process, as it pertains to traditional “healthy” mourning, is described by Derrida as involving ‘an interiorizing idealization [which] takes in itself or upon itself the body and voice of the other, the other’s visage and person, ideally and quasi-literally devouring them’, a process of mimesis (1986:34). To “succeed” in such a process of mourning by taking on the remembered aspects of the dead other in order to overcome losing them is in fact to fail, because in this assimilative process we neglect to allow the other a discrete living being in us (1986:35). Conversely, the movement of incorporation as ‘faithful interiorization’, in hosting the other as ‘a part of us, between us’ carried ‘like an unborn child, like a future’, strangely ‘succeeds’ in preserving some measure of alterity for the other, in the sense that:

(…) an aborted interiorization is at the same time a respect for the other as other, a sort of tender rejection, a movement of renunciation which leaves the other alone, outside, over there, in his death, outside of us (1986:35).

Characteristically, having presented these grounds for a subversion of the traditional introjection/incorporation dichotomy, Derrida then casts fresh doubt on his own logic, admitting that it is this very ‘schema’, whereby ‘success fails’ and ‘failure succeeds’ that ‘makes true mourning impossible’ (1986:35). Here, he reflects upon the German word ‘Erinnerung’, denoting at once ‘memory and interiorization’ and thus commingling the notion of a ‘subjectivizing interiorization’ (1986:35). As Derrida explains, De Man, following Hegel, had himself considered Erinnerung alongside Gedächtnis as an ‘opposition (…) between remembrance as interiorization and a thinking memory which can also be linked to technical and mechanical hypomnemesis’, which he notably compared to that of symbol and sign (1986:35-6). Derrida questions whether the kind of ‘nonsubjectivizable law of thought beyond interiorization’ represented by Gedächtnis is what occurs in mourning the other in/between us when we remember them—or whether it is instead Erinnerung’s interiorising memory (1986:37). The following crucial passage outlines the process at stake:

The movement of interiorization keeps within us the life, thought, body, voice, look or soul of the other, but in the form of those hypomnemata, memoranda, signs or
symbols, images or mnesic representations which are only lacunary fragments, detached and dispersed—only “parts” of the departed other. In turn they are parts of us, included “in us” in a memory which suddenly seems greater and older than us, “greater,” beyond any quantitative comparisons: sublimely greater than this other that the memory harbors and guards within it, but also greater with this other, greater than itself, inadequate to itself, pregnant with this other (Derrida, 1986:37).

Here, Derrida describes the process by which ‘parts’ of the other are assimilated in the mourning subject through introjection, parts which render bereaved memory greater than either the self or the other and greater with this other (1986:37). Further, he suggests that:

The figure of this bereaved memory becomes a sort of (possible and impossible) metonymy, where the part stands for the whole and for more than the whole that it exceeds. An allegorical metonymy, too, which says something other than what it says (…) It speaks the other and makes the other speak, but it does so in order to let the other speak (…) (1986:37).

This notion of mourning as a paradoxical metonymical movement, in which the bereaved subject takes into itself a part of the other which it preserves as a discrete being and by which this subject is themself expanded, constitutes a profound way of rethinking mourning beyond subject-object and introjection-incorporation oppositions and revealing the co-presence and mutual implication of these polarities within mourning. At the same time, it refigures the question of mourning in view of the agency of the other, and of our answerability to the other in remembering and mourning the dead. Derrida refines this metonymical allegory when he emphasises that:

(…) what defies the simple and “objective” logic of sets, what disrupts the simple inclusion of a part within the whole, is what recalls itself beyond interiorizing memory (Erinnerung), is what recalls itself to thought (Gedächtnis) and thinks itself as a “part” which is greater than the “whole” (1986:38).

By this logic, we could say that this discrete, synecdochic part, this other that I harbour in me, in bereaved memory, is preserved in its otherness and makes me
other, more than one, more than myself—this other in me, in us, between us, exceeds me. Derrida goes on to say:

It is the other as other, the non-totalizable trace which is in-adequate to itself and to the same. This trace is interiorized in mourning as that which can no longer be interiorized, as impossible Erinnerung, in and beyond mournful memory—constituting it, traversing it, exceeding it, defying all reappropriation (…) (1986:38).

In this unending, untotalisable movement lies, for Derrida, ‘the sublimity of a mourning without sublimation and without the obsessive triumph of which Freud speaks’, which honours the one we mourn by affirming their otherness that lives within us (1986:38-9). This paradoxical part-whole relation of the other in us, that transforms and expands the mourner while resisting and exceeding them, foregrounds the qualities of proximity, intimacy, interconnection and exchange in relating to the other, of which Watkin (extending from Bowlby regarding bereavement) and Morton (in view of ecological ethics) both speak. At the same time, Derrida’s metonymic conception of mourning encompasses a recognition of the difference and distinction of the other with respect to the mourner, a sense of not only the other’s ‘proxim[ity] but [also of their] separate[ness]’ that Watkin argues is central to ethical elegiac writing (2004:165). Such a recognition of negotiating between the ethical necessity of respecting the other’s unknowable alterity, and opening oneself to a relation of intimacy, mutual implication, and dialogue with the other, resonates throughout the discussions of various thinkers in the context of ecological ethics, including Morton, Cronon and Plumwood, as discussed in the previous chapter. Derrida’s metonymical understanding of mourning presents an opportunity to test, develop and refine these ideas, in view of the possibility of an ethical elegiac mode pertaining to ecological loss. As a delicate and painful negotiation between infidelities in an effort to honour the dead other while avoiding as far as possible totalising him, Derridean mourning emphasises what we might call the ecological principles of intimacy and difference, which are reflected in the metonymical structure of the other as a part living within us—an other whom we not only witness, but are witnessed by. This formulation suggests a means of thinking our interconnection with nature while also accounting for its radical singularity, and acknowledging our answerability in
writing nature.

Moreover, in Derrida’s understanding of friendship in relation to mourning is offered a means of figuring the paradoxical phenomenon of loss and mourning as an ongoing relation to a living other, preceding absolute loss. This is an understanding that provides for the contingency and incipience of the ecological loss that scientists determine we are facing now, no matter what we do, an expansion of the framework for thinking about loss that ethical eco-elegy demands. As Derrida explains in *Politics of Friendship* (1994):

> The anguished apprehension of mourning (without which the act of friendship would not spring forth in its very energy) insinuates itself a priori and anticipates itself; it haunts and plunges the friend, before mourning, into mourning (...it weeps death before death (1997:14).

That one friend will survive to witness and mourn the other’s death is, for Derrida, ‘the condition of possibility for friendship’ (1997:14). Crucially for the task of eco-elegy, this concept of friendship as a relation which from the outset is structured by this condition provides a way of thinking mourning as a contingent structure that precedes the death of the other, a structure not predicated only on irrevocable “total” loss that has already occurred. (While species extinctions certainly qualify as ecological instances of such total loss, the insidious and incremental degradation in the health of Great Barrier Reef, for example, represents a loss that is at once in-process, incipient and contingent on our interim actions.) This structure offers a means of clarifying the demands and operations of mourning and loss in light of ecological “loss”, as not exclusive to death or absolute loss, but as also bearing upon a living, ongoing relation. In addition, Derrida’s concept of friendship facilitates an understanding of how the signifier “loss” names not simply the sudden lack of a finite thing but the loss of the opportunity for the continuation of a series of encounters, by which we engage with the alterity of a living other. When the other is dead or otherwise gone, this relationship can be carried on only between us and the other in us. In this light, it is possible to see how the signifiers “nature” and “ecology” also stand in for a series, functioning as a meta-noun for an endless constellation of inter-relationships. To speak of “losing nature”/ecology, then, is to speak of losing the
opportunity for the continuation of a series of encounters with nature. In this way, Derrida’s conception of “anticipatory” mourning for the friend offers a way of rethinking elegiac loss in terms of a broader ecological understanding of loss as deprivation of experience (for transformative encounter and exchange with the living other) and as a diminishment of complexity.

**Commemoration & the metonymic force: ‘The Deaths of Roland Barthes’**

Since *MPM*, Derrida has continued his painstaking consideration of not only the question of ethical mourning, but the question of ethical commemoration, in a series of reflexive and intimate writings which elegiacally enact commemoration for friends who have died, at the same time as they question whether and how it should be done. One such text, ‘The Deaths of Roland Barthes’ (2001), written upon the occasion of Barthes’ death in 1980, addresses the particular conundrums implicated in funerary writing, insights about which are also pertinent to elegy. In commemorating Barthes and speaking of the impossibilities of doing so without committing the various betrayals of mourning—while insisting finally on its necessity—Derrida expands upon his metonymic conception of the other in us and the law of friendship. Moreover, he does so in dialogue with Barthes’s own work—notably his metonymic structure of the *punctum* and *studium* presented in *Camera Lucida* (1980)—in this way enacting his recognition of the ethical imperative in commemoration to “let the other speak”, in addition to speaking of and to them. In reflection upon the loss of Barthes and upon Barthes’s own mourning of his mother which underwrites his conception of the *punctum*, Derrida demonstrates how metonymy allows for us to speak of the part in relation to the whole, the singular in relation to the general—and in doing so, to transport ideas, to disturb and to move. As such, it is a text crucial to developing an understanding of metonymy as an allegorical movement for a more ethical elegiac writing, which might be extended to the context of eco-loss.

A profoundly elegiac text, written after Barthes’s mother’s death and shortly
before his own, *Camera Lucida* is at once a philosophical and personal inquiry into the nature of photography and mourning. In the effort to rediscover ‘the essence of [his mother’s] identity’ by searching through family photographs, Barthes describes himself as ‘struggling among images partially true, and therefore totally false’, an experience he compares to his frequent dreams of her, in which she is displaced, altered or obscured (2000:66). Both entail a ‘Sisyphean labor: to reascend, straining toward the essence, to climb back down without having seen it, and to begin all over again’ (2000:66). Yet, to his astonishment, Barthes does find a photograph in which he ‘rediscovered’ the ‘truth’ of his mother, her presence-in-absence, ‘a sentiment as certain as remembrance’ (2000:70). This photograph depicts his mother as a child in a winter garden, and as such is labelled ‘The Winter Garden Photograph’. Corresponding to this personal search in *Camera Lucida* is a more critical one, whereby in observing and questioning his own visceral reactions to various photographs in a phenomenological mode, Barthes provisionally delineates two central operational structures, or ‘themes’ at work: the punctum and the studium (2000:27). The punctum is conceived of as ‘wound’ or ‘prick’ which disturbs the more objective generality of the photographic scene, the field of the studium, which broadly inspires only the spectator’s ‘unconcerned desire’, interest or disinterest, taste or distaste (2000:26-7). The punctum is a singular yet seemingly arbitrary detail such as a child’s bad teeth or the quality of a hand, which draws the attention of a particular spectator as if by accident and moves or “pierces” them by some mysterious nature of its placement in the composition (2000:26). While at times it ‘fills the whole picture’, more frequently, the detail of the punctum is that of ‘a partial object’ (2000:43; 45). Speaking of his own experience in viewing one photograph, Barthes locates the punctum in a woman’s ‘strapped pumps’, which provokes in him ‘great sympathy…almost a kind of tenderness’, an involuntary response which he is unable to quantify (2000:43, emphasis in original). In the operation of the punctum, Barthes detects a certain ‘power of expansion’ that he observes as being ‘often metonymic’ (2000:45). This metonymic power arises from the strange coincidence of part and whole in relation to the other, with one detail (a shoe, a house, a smile, a road) within the prosaic frame of the photographic studium. Within this frame, the punctum, through the spectator’s gaze, somehow yields or makes reference to something greater, a referent beyond
the frame. This ‘partial object’ has the strange capacity to draw the gaze, inspiring a kind of recognition that is nonetheless difficult to correlate, and to physically affect the individual spectator without their really knowing why, arousing, for example, a feeling of tenderness, an uncanny sense of home, or a vivid memory of place. This involuntary yet powerful sense of visitation, and of the familiar which is also strange, aligns Barthes’s phenomenon of the punctum with haunting and the uncanny. In its visceral suggestion of a beyond, the punctum’s partial object operates as a metonym. This metonymic power is described evocatively by Barthes in an example of a photograph of ‘a blind gypsy violinist being led by a boy’ (2000:45). While this is the photograph’s immediate, objective scene, it is not what “holds” Barthes, for he sees beyond it by the punctum’s seemingly magical power of transportation:

(…) now what I see, by means of this “thinking eye” which makes me add something to the photograph, is the dirt road; its texture gives me the certainty of being in Central Europe; I perceive the referent (…) I recognize, with my whole body, the straggling villages I passed through on my long-ago travels in Hungary and Rumania (2000:45).

In this way, the photographic punctum lures Barthes, in the act of looking, into an involuntary and visceral experience of a beyond, an elsewhere outside the frame. Derrida describes this metonymical movement thus:

Though it is no longer there (present, living, real), its having-been-there presently a part of the referential or intentional structure of my relationship to the photogram, the return of the referent indeed takes the form of a haunting. (…) Already a sort of hallucinating metonymy: it is something else, a piece come from the other (from the referent) that finds itself in me, before me, but also in me like a piece of me (since the referential implication is also intentional and noematic; it belongs neither to the sensible body nor to the medium of the photogram) (2001b:54).

Moreover, the metonymic structure of the punctum is described by Derrida as ‘contrapuntal’ to the field of the studium, which it disturbs, and ‘induces’ metonymy (2001b:58; 57). The punctum’s power of expansion is also a power of supplement—the punctum supplements the photograph through the spectator who
associates it with a meaning that transcends the photograph’s apparent content. Moreover, it is a kind of displaced and dysfunctional signifier—the punctum fails to deliver an intelligible concept (a signified), yet provokes a sensory reaction. The process of signification here is short-circuited by the photograph’s direct projection of and toward a referent that cannot ultimately be manifested. Despite the punctum’s failure to manifest the referent in its reality, by way of its strange metonymical power of association it does paradoxically succeed in transmitting a trace, lending it its transcendental quality as an ‘emanation of the referent’, the return of the dead (Barthes, 2000:80).

The power of the punctum consists in its strange facilitation of the impossible, an “encounter” with the other. As a text mobilised by Barthes’s loss of his mother and desire to somehow “find” her again through the photographic image, Camera Lucida’s entire discourse is, to cite Derrida, ‘irradiated’ by one photographic punctum beyond all others (2001b:43). This is that of the Winter Garden Photograph, which we are never shown and yet are compelled to imagine. This long-searched-for photograph achieved the impossible for Barthes—by recalling the sense of his dead mother as a living being, through her unassuming image as a child captured one day, and preserved for the grieving Barthes decades later to find. Through his bereaved gaze, this photograph transcends the limits of its frame, and galvanises the wider quest of Camera Lucida. As Derrida says, ‘[t]he impossible sometimes, by chance, becomes possible: as a utopia’ (2001b:45). Here Derrida echoes Barthes’s admission in Camera Lucida that the Winter Garden Photograph ‘achieved for me, utopically, the impossible science of the unique being’ (1980:71). Reflecting on these words, Derrida observes that Barthes:

(...) said this uniquely, turned toward his mother and not toward the Mother. But the poignant singularity does not contradict the generality, it does not forbid it from having the force of law, but only arrows it, marks, and signs it (2001b:46).

Here, Derrida distinguishes the way in which speaking of a singularity (the unique, particular being of Barthes’s own mother) paradoxically has the capacity to speak a more universal truth than when we address directly a figure or generality (the idea of the mother) in the first instance. This instinctive truth is
recalled by Duras’s proclamation, in the epigraph to this chapter, that “everyone” does not make you cry’ (1999:35). In thus transmitting the “essence” of his mother as a ‘unique being’, this photograph accomplishes that which ‘is impossible and yet takes place, utopically, metonymically, as soon as it marks, as soon as it writes, even “before” language’ (Derrida, 2001b:43; 46). Utopically, through the punctum, Barthes’s mother, ‘the unique other’, ‘appears, that is to say, without appearing, for the other can appear only by disappearing’ (Derrida, 2001b:48). The punctum, suggests Derrida, allows Barthes to express:

(…) the point of singularity, the traversal of discourse toward the unique, the “referent” as the irreplaceable other, the one who was and will no longer be, who returns like that which will never come back (2001b:56).

That is, ‘[t]he metonymy of the punctum…allows us to speak of the unique, to speak of and to it. It yields the trait that relates to the unique’ (Derrida, 2001b:58). This metonymical movement between the singular and the general allows us to be moved by the punctum of the Winter Garden Photograph of Barthes’s mother, without knowing her or seeing her image. Suggests Derrida:

Only a metonymic force can continue to assure a certain generality to the discourse (…) How else could we, without knowing her, be so deeply moved by what he said about his mother, who was not only the Mother, or a mother, but the only one she was and of whom such a photo was taken “on that day”? (2001b:58)

In this way, the metonymic force of the Winter Garden Photograph at once “speaks of the unique”, the singularity of Roland Barthes’s mother, the being of Henriette Barthes, “on that day” when she was a child in a winter garden—and also speaks of a greater truth beyond Barthes’s mother, a truth of the lost beloved, the passing of time, and the strange visitation of the living by the dead, the persistence of presence in absence. The movement that allows us to be wounded by the Winter Garden Photograph rests not on a transposition but on a relation. This constitutes the relation of the singular to the general, a relation that preserves alterity—the alterity of the singular instance of Barthes’s mother in the Winter Garden Photograph—‘almost intact’ (Derrida, 2001b:58). As Derrida explains, ‘I
do not tend to replace his [Barthes’s] mother with mine’ (2001b:58). Rather, the metonymic relation of the part to the whole or the specific to the universal allows for our reading of the WGP to encompass both Barthes’s mother and ‘the Figure of the Mother’, without the difference between the singular and the general being smeared (Derrida, 2001b:58). In this way, the Winter Garden Photograph as punctum illuminates the metonymic complication of mourning by Derrida, whereby as faithful mourners we must negotiate between attending to the singularity or unicity of the other, and ourselves relating to the other in an ongoing exchange that, to a degree, risks reducing this singularity. Neither movement alone is sufficient—we must negotiate the difficult movement between letting the other speak, and speaking of and to the other so as not to abandon them.

As Derrida notes, in Camera Lucida, Barthes speaks of another punctum present in every photograph, and, Derrida suggests, in all metonymy, which is time (2001b:60). In its uncanny presentation of immediacy and history in the same frame, the photograph attests to what has been, existing literally as an ‘emanation of the referent’ which it preserves and suspends (Barthes, 2000:80). It is this uncanny suspension of the referent that imparts to the photograph its revenential quality. This temporal punctum, Derrida observes, constitutes ‘the relation to some unique and irreplaceable referent’, which ‘took place only once’ (2001b:61). In speaking here of the temporal punctum as understood through Barthes’s meditation on photography, Derrida also describes the wider operations of the ‘metonymic force’:

The metonymic force thus divides the referential trait, suspends the referent and leaves it to be desired, while still maintaining the reference. It is at work in the most loyal of friendships; it plunges the destination into mourning while at the same time engaging it (2001b:61).

In speaking of Barthes’s punctum and of the latter’s photographic search for the impossible utopia of the singular other that is his own dead mother, Derrida reflexively discusses the impossibility of faithful mourning and commemoration in reference to his own mourning of Barthes, as an other who is no longer alive in himself, but who lives on only in those who knew him. Here, he once more
presents the choice of the faithful mourner as being between ‘two infidelities’, resulting in the conundrum of ‘having to do and not do both at once’ (2001b:45). To avoid reducing the dead other by speaking of them, one could approach mourning by refraining from ‘say[ing] anything that comes back to oneself’ or ‘to let oneself be accompanied or preceded in counterpoint by the friend’s voice’, ‘just quoting’, thus letting the other speak while ‘effac[ing] oneself’ (Derrida, 2001b:45). And yet, ‘this excess of fidelity would end up saying and exchanging nothing’, denying the other a living place in ourselves, ‘sending death back to death’ (Derrida, 2001b:45). Conversely, suggests Derrida, one could refrain from ‘all quotation, all identification, all rapprochement even’ (2001b:45), in order to preserve (some measure of) the other’s alterity. And yet the infidelity in this approach involves risking the disappearance of the other-as-other, and denying of hosting the other as a living part of oneself (Derrida, 2001b:24). And so it is that Derrida suggests that the only option of the faithful mourner is ‘having to do and not do both at once’, in a kind of constant, painstaking negotiation (2001b:24). This is a negotiation between letting the other speak and interrupting this speech so as to speak with the other, in an ongoing exchange between us the living and the other in ourselves who is in this way allowed a continued existence. Asks Derrida in his memorial essay for Lyotard: ‘How to leave him alone without abandoning him?’ (2001c:225). In attempting to do justice to the other in our mourning, we must recognise that the other lives no longer except ‘in or between us the living’ in our memory, and do not “in themselves” hear our orations of and to them (Derrida, 1986:32-3). We must do our mindful best to preserve the other’s alterity by ‘leaving him alone’ and letting him speak, while engaging with our living memory of the other in an ongoing exchange so as not to “abandon him” or deprive him of the potential for transformative exchange—and so as to permit him futurity, an ongoing existence within our being. That is, we must reflect, speak and write of and to the other, because our duty to the other demands we do so, despite the dilemmas of infidelity that such activity involves. For Derrida, ‘to succeed’ in mourning is paradoxically also ‘to fail, to fail well’, a formulation with evident implications for elegy (2001a:144). Like Barthes’s Camera Lucida, Derrida’s reflexive and self-conscious writing on mourning wagers more than theory in its enterprise—it is personal as well as philosophical, an enactment of
the critical concerns at stake; at once elegy and essay. In this light, it is understandable why Derrida’s own elegiac writings are pervaded with such mindful attention, hesitation and doubt, and why each of these writings reflexively calls into question its own mode of discourse and raison d'être, without arriving at a resolution. In his elegy-essay for Barthes as for many others, Derrida tries to let the other speak by quoting their words and proceeding in dialogue with their thought, questions his own right to speak, and reminds himself and us that the friend of whom he writes can no longer hear him, although in memory he lives on. To follow Derrida, we are, in writing elegy and reaching toward the lost other, condemned to fail, and yet our responsibility is to “fail well”, by speaking of and to the lost other, and by turning toward them. As Derrida articulates, in writing of the lost other, we must be wary of ‘finish[ing] him off’ or ‘reduc[ing] him in any case to what can still be contained by a literary or rhetorical performance’ (2001b:50).

**Being witnessed: ‘By Force of Mourning’**

Just as Derrida’s commemoration of Barthes engages with Barthes’s own thought, so does he engage with major themes in the thought of Louis Marin in his commemorative lecture, ‘By Force of Mourning’ (2001), a text of particular relevance to the elegiac mode. Referencing Marin’s work on the portrait and on force, Derrida offers a profound way of expanding how we think about the images we are left with after the death of the other, who we are left to harbour in ourselves through ‘love, hospitality or friendship’ (2001a:160).

In speaking metonymically of the other-in-us, and ‘of inside and outside’, suggests Derrida, ‘we are naming space, we are speaking of a visibility of the body, a geometry of gazes, an orientation of perspectives’ (2001a:159), representing a refinement of Bowlby’s understanding of mourning as a process contingent on spatial relations. Moreover, Derrida deduces from this scenario that, ultimately, what is left in us of the other is reducible to images. What he argues is disregarded in ‘this rhetoric of space’, however:
(...) is that the force of the image has to do less with the fact that one sees something in it than with the fact that one is seen there in it. The image sees more than it is seen. The image looks at us (2001a:160, my emphasis).

This ‘inversion of the gaze’ (Derrida, 2001a:160), as I will shortly explain, has crucial implications for thinking about the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as the meta-allegory of elegy, invoked implicitly and explicitly by elegists and elegy-scholars, increasingly in view of ethics. The other in us, which we harbour within our bereaved memory and which in turn makes us other, will always also exceed us, exceed our memory’s finite store of images, and our ability to interiorize the other within our subjectivity. Our images of the other in us exceed us, resist our efforts to totalise them, and refer not only to the other but to ourselves. Our remembered images, that constitute the other within us, implicate us, “look at us”, demand we be answerable to the singular other they shelter within us, who is neither any longer “in himself” nor completely interiorised within us. Respecting the other whom we mourn involves recognising this complex and confounding metonymy, whereby the other is at once within us, between us and also outside us—while (being dead) no longer “in himself”. Says Derrida:

Louis Marin is outside and he is looking at me, he himself, and I am an image for him (...) and it is for this, for him, that I am here this evening. He is my law, the law, and I appear before him and his gaze. In my relationship to myself, he is here before me, stronger or more forceful than I (2001a:160).

Derrida further clarifies his meaning by affirming to his audience at a commemorative conference for Marin: ‘We are all looked at (...) and each one singularly, by Louis Marin. He looks at us. In us. He looks in us. This witness sees in us’ (2001a:161). Here, Derrida delineates a reflexive movement in which the traditional direction of the mourning gaze is not only inverted, but predicated on an exchange of gazes. Being ‘looked at’ by the other within us, having our gaze returned, demands the bereaved subject be answerable to the other not as a sublimated part of their own interiority but as a singular other who is at once within and outside them, and whose alterity can never be interiorised. Derrida has spoken already of this movement in mourning Barthes, insisting that ‘Roland
Barthes looks at us’, and cautioning that this look ‘is within us but it is not ours; we do not have it available to us like a moment or part of our interiority’ (2001b:44). The quality of this look might be anything from ‘indifferent’ to ‘fervent’, for ultimately ‘it can give us any of the innumerable signs of life or death that we might draw from the circumscribed reserve of his texts in our memory’ (Derrida, 2001b:44). Derrida insists on constantly recalling that, being dead, neither Marin nor Barthes exist any longer “in themselves” to hear his words of commemoration or to look at or witness him—only the part of them that lives within those who mourn them, who must, in being faithful, realise how that “part” is not the whole. As Derrida urges, ‘[h]e is no more, he whom we see in images or in recollection, he of whom we speak, whom we cite, whom we try to let speak…he is no longer here’ (2001a:160). To recognise this, suggests Derrida, is comparable to ‘a debt, the last one, owed to the friend’ (2001a:160). In contrast to the state of the object who is only looked at, the mourner’s recognition of the other’s gaze upon them shelters, for the other, the agency and alterity of the subject who looks. To recognise, in mourning the other, that we are not only the witness of and to the other, but are ourselves witnessed by the other even, or, Derrida would say, especially after their death, is a transgressive proposition for elegy studies and for eco-elegy. Moreover, this being looked at/in by the other:

(…) indicate[s] an absolute excess and dissymmetry in the space of what relates us to ourselves and constitutes the “being-in-us,” in something completely other than a mere subjective interiority: in a place open to an infinite transcendence. The one who looks at us in us—and for whom we are—is no longer; he is completely other…(Derrida, 2001a:161, emphasis in original).

This ‘excess and dissymmetry’ is constituted in this exchange of gazes, in the fact that we are not at liberty to look at the other without his looking back at us. In other words, far from simply absorbing the other of our memory within our ‘subjective interiority’, our harbouring of the other in ourselves transforms us, acts upon us in a mode of reciprocity and exchange. We can only interiorise such a dissymmetry by having our own interiority exceeded, fractured or wounded (Derrida, 2001a:160). Ethical mourning demands we are alive to this, and take pains to at once acknowledge that the other in us is not equivalent to the other in
himself who is dead, and to preserve the alterity that remains to the other living in us. The other in us and the other outside us divides our own subjectivity, opens us to an infinite alterity that we cannot contain, sublimate or interiorise:

We bear in ourselves the gaze that Louis Marin bears on us. Powers of the image. This gaze is his, and it will always remain his, infinitely; it comes from him singularly, from him alone, alone as always, more alone than ever, over there, outside, far away. Far away in us. (Derrida, 2001a:161).

Like his discussion of Barthes’s metonymy of the punctum, Derrida’s analogy here of the returned gaze, which draws from Marin’s own work on the portrait, illuminates his profound understanding of the responsibility we owe to the other, in life and in death, and how we are to reckon with the difficult task of its answering. Derrida’s spectatorial framing of the mourner’s situation and responsibility, as one who, ‘through friendship, love or hospitality’ opens their own interiority to the other so that they might live on as a part of the mourner, who ‘bear[s]’ in themselves the ‘gaze that [the other] bears on [them]’ (2001a:161) speaks powerfully to elegy, a literary tradition haunted by the sacrificial gaze of Orpheus. In the defining moment of Ovid’s myth, the poet-musician Orpheus, unable to resist his desire, turns to look at Eurydice before she has emerged from the shades of the underworld into mortal day, thus defying the gods and condemning her to a second death and himself to losing her twice. Then, as Eurydice descends once more to the underworld, Orpheus is condemned to turn back, to look away from her as he emerges into day without her, affected by his second loss and the freshly felt grief which moves him to sing of Eurydice’s absence, to create presence from felt absence in art. This crucial movement of Orpheus’s turn and turn back is the central movement of elegy, the movement defining the transition from felt absence to art, that ancient effort to make the absent present. To sing of Eurydice, Orpheus needed to lose her, and to look away, finding consolation in his song and in the natural world around him, which animate and are animated by his music. This sacrificial turn of Orpheus is not only that of every elegist, but also that of the traditional mourning subject who would seek an end to mourning by sublimating and turning from the lost other, denying them a harbour as a living and discrete part of themselves. In speaking of
the image and the act of looking and being looked at, in an analogy inscribed with his metonymical understanding of responsible mourning, Derrida offers a way of reimagining the Orphic-elegiac gaze so as to encompass Eurydice’s agency and Orpheus’s answerability. Faithful mourning, if we follow Derrida’s cue, would demand that, in turning his gaze toward Eurydice, and in turning his gaze away from her, Orpheus registers that he is also looked at, and witnessed by Eurydice, whose singularity even (or especially) in death exceeds the part of her that lives in him—and recognises that in singing of her he must also let her speak, and that she will always exceed his song.

II.

Eco-elegy & ethics

Derrida’s complex understanding of mourning as a metonymical relation to otherness and as a condition of living friendship provides a means of refining the ways in which we think about elegiac literature which resists, or is without recourse to enact the traditional elegiac movement of consolation. Such a movement, predicated on the possibility of there being an end to mourning, on turning away from the lost other and “moving on”, is manifestly not available to any responsible mode of elegy concerned with ecological loss. From Ramazani, speaking of divergent forms of loss in modern elegy, to Morton in specific view of eco-elegy, the term “melancholia” is increasingly being invoked to describe a mode of elegiac mourning in opposition to this traditional consolatory mode, when such mourning is not available, or is not ethical. The recourse to melancholia in our discourse about ethical eco-elegy by Morton, as a mode of “lingering” in the moment of loss without smearing over its painfulness or sublimating its urgency in the desire for consolation, acknowledges what is at stake and how far we have already gone in wagering the planet. Certainly, the confounding grief and resistance to closure which such a mode describes speaks
incisively to the formal and narrative movements at work in much recent eco-poetry and fiction.

However, as this chapter’s overview of his work indicates, Derrida’s understanding of mourning (and mournful commemoration) offers a means of rethinking the shortfalls of elegiac “melancholia” as discussed by Morton in view of eco-elegy. Such a rethinking is offered through Derrida’s acknowledgement and ethical complication of the distinction established by Freud between melancholic and normative mourning, and through his establishment of mourning as an impossible and unending responsibility which regardless is owed to the other. Additionally, his theory expands mourning to encompass contingent and incipient loss, and foregrounds the answerability of the mourner in light of the other’s agency. Finally, in his work on mourning Derrida establishes a metonymic, relational framework for thinking mourning as a responsibility of negotiating between intimacy with the other and preservation of the other’s alterity and distance.

In examining the implications of these aspects of Derridean mourning to the development of an ethical poetics of eco-elegy, it is necessary to briefly address another, more recent invocation of melancholia in reference to eco-elegy, by Margaret Ronda in her essay, ‘Melancholia in the Anthropocene’ (2013). Additionally, the remaining discussion speaks briefly to the eco-elegiac poetics at work within a work of poetry and a work of prose—Juliana Spahr’s elegiac poem ‘Gentle Now, Don’t Add to Heartache’ (1995), and Cormac McCarthy’s elegiac novel The Road (2006).

In discussing the literary implications of the “end of nature” paradigm as recognised by McKibben and others, in relation to the rise in ‘collective human agency’ at a time of ecological crisis (signified by the emergence of the term “Anthropocene” to define our present geological epoch), Ronda explores the ‘melancholy’ poetics of Spahr’s ‘Gentle Now’. In doing so, Ronda also speaks to Morton’s application of melancholia to eco-elegy (without directly employing this phrase), yet does not criticise Morton’s espousal of elegiac melancholia in light of its complex history, against which, as this essay argues, Morton’s

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28 Hereafter abbreviated to ‘Gentle Now’.
conceptualisations are inadequately defined. Importantly, Ronda diverges from Morton in discussing melancholic eco-elegy with actual reference to an example of such an elegy that is pervaded by the confoundment and grief of our contemporary ecological crisis (in comparison to Morton’s 1816 example of *Alastor*). ‘Gentle Now’, a much-anthologised eco-elegy within the ecopoetic movement, converges around the changing relation of the speaker to a local stream. Unfolding in five parts, the poem tells of the gradual movement from an Edenic unity between speaker and stream, to the speaker’s ultimate forsaking of the stream. Thus ‘Gentle Now’ narrates the story of the speaker’s turn from the natural world in favour of other attachments, despite the complicity in the stream’s degradation that this turn involves. This movement is defined by the changing proximity of the speaker’s relation to the stream. The opening lines of Spahr’s poem suggest a mythical union between self and natural environment ‘before division, individuation, and loss’:

We come into the world.
We come into the world and there it is.
The sun is there.
The brown of the river leading to the blue and the brown of the ocean is there.
Salmon and eels are there moving between the brown and the brown and the blue.
The green of the land is there.
Elders and youngers are there.
Fighting and possibility and love are there.
And we begin to breathe.
(…)
We come into the world and begin to move between the brown and the blue and the green of it (2007:124).

As Ronda astutely notes, this evocation of unity with nature is ‘a fantasy of non-agency’, in which humans exist in harmony with the natural environment in a relationship of interdependence rather than exploitation (2013:online). As Ronda observes:
It is only midway through “Gentle Now” that this narrative of ecological intimacy is revealed to be a reconstitution of an origin story from a retrospective position of guilty grief (2013:online).

In ‘Gentle Now’, Ronda reads a melancholy which ‘refus[es] to turn away from the work of impossible mourning’, thus coming closer to Derrida’s understanding of mourning (2013:online). Unlike Morton, in speaking of melancholy/melancholia in view of Spahr’s elegy, Ronda references Freud directly, speaking incisively of the strange way that ecological loss inverts and confounds Freud’s understanding of melancholia. Noting what Freud describes as the prevalence of a more ideal, unconscious, indistinct loss in melancholia in contrast to normative mourning and comparing this kind of loss to that represented in Spahr’s elegy, Ronda asks:

Is it the beings in the stream—the “elephant ear,” the “ohio pigtoe”? Is it the stream itself? Do the stream and its creatures actually die, or does the speaker merely turn away from them, so that they are lost to her consciousness? (2013:online)

Ronda’s questions in reference to Spahr’s elegy here attest to the amorphousness and contingency which complicate our ability to speak of loss in relation to the infinite-yet-finite web of living and non-living forms that constitute the ecosystems of the natural world. Spahr’s stream, suggests Ronda (2013:online), represents what Freud in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ describes as a melancholic ‘object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness’ (Freud, 1917:245). This, suggests Ronda, constitutes ‘a loss of an idea and its associated forms of experience, whose absence is at once too all-pervasive and too close to name’ (2013:online). However, Ronda’s suggestion here, in referring to the ‘loss of an idea’ of nature without qualifying the relation of that idea to either reality or a cultural ideal, risks perpetuating the blurring of the signifiers “nature” and “loss” which, as has been discussed, so frequently troubles discourse on ecological loss. The meaning that Ronda gestures toward in referring to loss as encompassing the ‘forms of experience’ that the lost object allowed for, however, can be refined through Derrida’s understanding of friendship as a relation in which the duty of mourning is inscribed before the death of either friend, a relation conditioned
from its outset by the knowledge that one friend will witness and mourn the other’s death, and which understands the friend’s death as, fundamentally, a loss of contingency, a loss of the opportunity to encounter the friend in his living alterity, to transform and be transformed by encounters with the friend, who while living can surprise and confound our internalised ideas of them, whereas in death we are left with the responsibility of carrying them in us while trying to still preserve our memory of their living singularity. This understanding emphasises the loss of the living friend as a loss of the opportunity for living encounter and exchange with the other, and as a deprivation and impoverishment of our own self in living without the other.

Further, Ronda emphasises the divergence of Spahr’s ‘more pessimistic’ melancholy in ‘Gentle Now’ from Morton’s melancholy that embraces the messy, unseemly dark side of a non-ideal nature (2013:online). Unlike Morton’s, suggests Ronda, Spahr’s melancholy ‘dwells on the painful consequences of being “without nature,” refusing to move “beyond” this loss’ (2013:online). While, notes Ronda, Morton’s melancholy focuses on ‘the present rather than the past, adjuring the elegiac poetics of loss, sorrow, and grieving for the uncanny, melancholic “reality” of ecological coexistence’, Spahr’s elegy ‘maintains the importance of elegiac retrospection and its language of necessity and loss’ (2013:online). In further contrast to Morton, Ronda notes that Spahr foregrounds ‘questions of obligation, culpability, and guilt’ (2013:online). In this way, Ronda suggests that Spahr’s poetics address ‘the determinative force of humans rather than indulging a claim that “nothing is determined yet”’ (2013:online). Moreover, Ronda astutely observes that Spahr’s melancholia is drawn from the understanding that the poetic ‘conventions’ of elegy ‘are finally inadequate to their current task, and that any attempt to take responsibility for this determination is never sufficient’ (2013:online). Accordingly, Ronda echoes other thinkers (of modern elegy as well as eco-elegy) such as Watkin and Morton in noting that Spahr’s elegy ‘mourns, as well, for an idealised elegy that is now impossible, an elegy whose forms of closure are no longer inhabitable’ (2013:online). Further, Ronda, referencing Spargo (2004:13), suggests that:

If, as Spargo argues, melancholia offers an “ethics of mourning” through its acknowledgement of “the other’s un cancellable and unassimilable value,” Spahr’s
poem explores what it means to have already “cancelled” this “value”; its “ethics,” then, can only be construed as negative rather than subversive or resistant, as in Spargo’s version (2013:endnote 32).

However, in suggesting that Spahr’s poem, in its poetics of negative mourning, goes so far as to “cancel the value” of the ecological other(s) it speaks of, Ronda overlooks the way that ‘Gentle Now’, for all its negative, non-foreclosed, and non-consolatory mourning, enacts a ceaseless affirmation of the profound fragility, singularity, richness and otherness of everything comprising the stream’s ecology, the loss of which is too enormous and confounding for the speaker to commence mourning.

Additionally, Ronda’s location of the negative melancholia of ‘Gentle Now’, along with McKibben’s The End of Nature, as beyond the bounds of eco-jeremiad, overlooks the way that the most sophisticated eco-jeremiadic texts, such as Carson’s Silent Spring (1962), resist “cancelling” and negating extant ecological loss not because the ecological realities they speak to are not (to varying degrees) potentially irremediable, but because our ecological predicament can always get worse. Moreover, the increasingly dire predictions of scientists, regarding the course on which we are set, does not ethically permit a position of despairing resignation. While McKibben’s subject (climate change) might be even more radically suggestive than Carson’s of relegating nature to a phenomenon whose ‘time has already run out’—as Ronda suggests of McKibben’s work (2013:online)—like Silent Spring, The End of Nature is mobilised by the commitment, despite and because of the direness of our ecological predicament, to incite efforts to minimise the losses our planet is on course for. That we make such efforts, and strive to be answerable to our ecological future and the non-human lives and processes at stake in our actions, in the face of despair and impossibility is precisely what we owe these others and ourselves, and what ethical ego-elegy constitutes.

In fact, while Spahr’s ‘Gentle Now’ is pervaded with the paralysing, unutterable guilt and grief of an eco-loss that seems hopeless and irremediable, as the speaker attempts to sublimate this loss in work, material objects and human love, the speaker’s narrative of “not mourning” is testament to the value of each discrete, lost other that is named and counted: the ‘caddisfly larva’; the
‘slenderhead darter’. While Spahr does not provide answers, her poem stands as an urgent allegory for the profundity of what we are wagering, which attests to the ethical impossibility of turning away, as the speaker does, and which resists precisely such a total negation as “cancelling” these others’ value—a movement that would seem to constitute a form of melancholic foreclosure in contradiction to Ronda's central argument. In this way, the ethical poetics of ‘Gentle Now’ must be understood as operating in the context of what might be described as a form of “cognitive dissonance” between the literal reality of what the speaker says and the cumulative emotional truth to which her words, and the poem itself, ultimately attest.

The question of whether an eco- jeremiadic mode remains viable, in the context of a global ecological reality so imperilled by human intervention that an alternate term for our present geological epoch (the Anthropocene) is gaining wide currency, speaks also to the problem of how we are to think ethical eco-elegy. This question, to a great extent, demonstrates the importance when writing and thinking eco-elegy, of more clearly considering divergent forms of eco-loss and their mourning in relation to temporality. At best, eco- jeremiad—or, to be more precise, the synergy of lamentation and prophetic warning in writing about eco-loss—is necessarily inscribed with an attendance to what is ecologically at stake, an attendance to contingency and futurity, which need not constitute totalising apocalypticism. Attending in eco-elegiac mourning to loss that is not only foregone, but contingent, loss that is in-process or “on the horizon” of future possibility, while foregrounding the ecological value of what exists now, and what might be lost lest we take action—regardless of our chances of success—seems integral to an eco-elegiac ethics. Although the literary task of lamenting loss, while calling for the preservation of what remains at stake, is more enormous than ever before, attendance to the future and a will to act must not be foreclosed. Even in negative, non-consolatory mourning, in which answers are not presumed, there must be affirmation of the other to, of and for which we speak.

Certainly, as has been argued, Morton’s emphasis on the instantaneous and undetermined in eco-elegy neglects to adequately account for the need in eco-elegy to testify to the irrevocable forms of ecological loss that are determined or anterior, in having already occurred (such as in extinction), and our culpability in this loss. However, neither does Ronda’s reading of Spahr’s melancholic poetics,
as being arrested in ‘elegiac retrospection’ and in the loss that has occurred, address the full scale of loss that an elegiac response to our ecological crisis demands (2013:online). Through her reading of ‘Gentle Now’, Ronda rightly intimates that Morton’s melancholy focuses too heavily on the present moment of ecological coexistence at the expense of attending to the pain and grief of what has already been lost. However, in speaking of melancholy as a mode of poetics that diverges from that of traditional elegy, it is also important (as writers and thinkers) to address explicitly the question of contingent and incipient loss, loss that has not yet occurred. Morton’s insistence of a poetics of melancholy that dwells in the present moment must be understood in light of his concerns regarding the danger, in elegising nature during this time of crisis, of leaping over the urgent moment we’re in now in envisioning a future apocalyptic loss. While such a movement is entirely understandable in light of current scientific projections, it carries ethical dilemmas. It is in view of the potential of such a movement to unhelpfully and violently totalise and forsake nature as a forgone loss prematurely, that Morton cautions against the ‘sadism of the elegiac mode’ and the need to ‘transcend’ this mode in favour of a melancholic lingering in the difficult ecological reality we’re in (2010:255). While Morton’s lack of recourse to examples of specific eco-elegies that envision eco-apocalypse in this problematic way is unhelpful, his caution against the dangers of an elegiac movement that perpetuates the sacrificial elegiac turn from an object we must not and cannot in reality turn from—a global environment in crisis—is well-advised. Greg Garrard also pinpoints a key danger in “apocalyptic rhetoric” when he suggests that: ‘[a]pocalypse provides an emotionally charged frame of reference within which complex, long-term issues are reduced to monocausal crises involving conflicts between recognisably opposed groups’ (2011:114). Further, Bradley J. Fest directs suspicion at eco-apocalyptic (and eco-jeremiadic) texts which:

(…) seem to blatantly ignore the facts that ecological disaster a) has already occurred and is always already occurring, b) that simply the term ecology should evoke the interconnectedness and complexity of the site of disaster in question (the world), and c) that environmental disaster is not this absurd(ly simple) (2009:online).
In contrast to ‘nuclear and Christian’ traditions of apocalyptic prediction, Fest suggests that modes of eco-apocalypse are challenged by the fact that environmental destruction ‘is always occurring as a process…Species go extinct, the ice caps melt, New Orleans floods. These are all “ends,” not one, big, garish, world-historical ending’ (2009:online). In light of the way that eco-disaster, in reality, ‘is not linear nor narrative’, Fest argues for ‘eco-discourses not constrained to imagine themselves at a singular moment of crisis’ (2009:online).

In this way, Fest foregrounds the importance, in representing eco-disaster, of a resistance to totalising eco-loss in a way that smears over both its contingency and the divergency of its relation to time, as this essay has also been at pains to demonstrate.  

However, in writing and speaking of eco-elegy we must also acknowledge the impossibility of not looking to the future and reckoning with the apparent incipience of loss that is still to come. This future (and in-process) loss, in its contingency, is the most urgent to address, and constitutes, perhaps more than any loss that has already occurred, the impetus behind the emotions of grief, guilt and mourning that are driving not only the emergence of eco-elegy but also the critical-creative discourses of ecocriticism, ecopoetics and cli-fi (fiction concerned with climate change). Indeed, it is only by facing the enormity of the future loss we are wagering (in addition to recognising what has been lost and what remains extant) that our ecological literatures (and our societies) can even begin to answer to what is now at stake. Lawrence Buell attests to this truth when he suggests that apocalyptic narratives ‘create images of doom to avert doom’, and, contentiously, that ‘[a]pocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental movement has at its disposal’ (1995:295; 285). However, I would suggest that mobilising certain apocalyptic or otherwise

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29 For a now-classic study of apocalyptic narrative, see Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (1967). For a broader discussion of the dangers implicated in apocalyptic thinking, particularly in view of power relations in American politics, religion and culture, see Lee Quinby’s *Anti-Apocalypse: Exercises in Genealogical Criticism* (1994).

30 The term “cli-fi” has recently emerged as an abbreviation for climate fiction, that is, fiction dealing directly with the subject of climate change, often in the near future, and frequently bearing a relation to sci-fi and themes of dystopia. Examples of recent literary fiction which can be encompassed within this broad category include Margaret Atwood’s *Maddadam Trilogy* (2009-2013), Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Windup Girl* (2009), Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behaviour* (2012), Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014), The term “cli-fi” can also pertain to film.
dystopic visions of our ecological future as a means of attending to the value and urgency of what we have to lose, need not necessarily be at odds with Garrard’s argument that ‘[o]nly if we imagine that the planet has a future…are we likely to take responsibility for it’ (2004:107). Rather, the extent to which such visions of future ecological loss—as mobilised in eco-elegiac literature—might be considered ethical or unethical depends on the extent to which such visions resist totalising or foreclosing the urgent contingency of our present ecological predicament and the divergency and multiplicity of loss, and non-human others, implicated in this predicament. As such, an ethical poetics of eco-elegy must neither focus on the present (at expense of past and future loss) as risked by Morton’s approach, nor the past (at expense of present and future loss) as Ronda’s reading of Spahr tends to emphasise, but to negotiate between foregone, in-process, and incipient forms of loss; loss which also constitutes our own diminishment, deprivation, and imperilment—and for which we are answerable.

In a 2009 essay, Kate Rigby similarly argues for the power of a literary attendance to futurity through the ‘prophetic imagination’ in testifying to ecological destruction and imperilment. Without invoking elegy specifically, Rigby’s emphasis on the value of prophecy, or looking forward toward the future implications of our current trajectories in ecological writing, is presented as a ‘mode of ecopoetic negativity’ in relation to a writing of lamentation in the Anthropocene, is directly applicable to the ethics and poetics of eco-elegy. Suggests Rigby:

The challenge for writing in the anthropocene, in the shadow of ecocide (…) is to find new ways of raising our voices from the level of ‘idle chatter’ to that of biting and stinging ecoprophetic witness (2009:online).

In this discussion, Rigby diverges from Ronda not only in foregrounding the importance of writing in view of the future ‘catastrophic consequences of continuing on our current ecocidal path’ (2009:online), but also in explicitly inscribing this call within the tradition of ecological jeremiad which Ronda’s reading of Spahr suggests is a mode we have now outstripped.

More recently, Deborah Bird Rose, also discussing ethical ecological writing in the Anthropocene (without addressing elegy directly), warns of the dangers in
such attendance in writing to a future that ultimately cannot be known. Recalling Morton’s cautions regarding apocalypticism, Rose speaks of the turn toward ‘catastrophe thinking’ in writing ecological crisis (2013:12). In such thinking, warns Rose:

(…) the temptation is to contrast looming catastrophe with present knowledge, and to think that we know the world as it is, even if we do not know the world as it will become (2013:12).

As such, Rose emphasises the need for ‘audacious faith’ grounded in an:

(…) accept[ance] that neither the world as it now is, nor the world as it is becoming, is fully knowable, and thus that we sustain our faith and our witness always in the face of our need to take ethical stands from within life processes that both radically precede and exceed us (2013:12).

Unlike Morton, Rose hesitates from suggesting that ethical ecological writing must eschew all future projections. Somewhat more carefully, Rose emphasises the importance in such writing of mindfully negotiating between speaking and refraining from speaking of that which we cannot presume to know. In this way, Rose echoes Derrida’s understanding of ethical mourning and commemoration for the other, as a necessary yet impossible duty of negotiating between speaking of, to and for the other, and leaving the other to their alterity. Suggests Rose, writing of ecological destruction at once involves ‘the necessity and the impossibility of speech’ (2013:8). To do so is to find oneself placed in an ‘impossible position as participants in and witnesses to catastrophes beyond our comprehension’ (Rose 2). This position ‘concerns the necessity of speaking of that which is beyond our ken’ (8). Such a position, suggests Rose:

(…) requires us to acknowledge ethical silence, and our challenge, therefore, is to speak without over-riding that silence. But ethical silence, in James Hatley’s terms, does speak: it speaks the quandary of response and responsibility toward that which is beyond our comprehension (2013:8).
Here, Rose foregrounds a form of careful negotiation, at once necessary and impossible, between speaking and hesitating from speaking of ecological loss, a phenomenon at once urgent and yet beyond our capacities to speak and imagine. Rose also foregrounds, in such a writing, modes of witness and dialogue\textsuperscript{31}, and a ‘[f]idelity to that which cannot be fully known’ (2013:12).

While the cautions of Morton and Rose regarding apocalyptic or catastrophic thinking in face of ecological crisis must be held in mind—and while Ronda is astute in recognising the difficulties posed for jeremiadic hope in the future “if action is taken”, by continued political inaction and scientific predictions of a dangerous temperature rise now being inevitable—Rigby’s jeremiadic urge to employ prophecy in writing to ‘awaken us to another way of thinking and being’, and to compel ‘just and compassionate action’ is more urgent than ever (2009:online). While inaction and the spectre of an inevitable two-degree temperature rise certainly render a negative, melancholic mode in literature understandable, abandoning the hope for change that constitutes ecological jeremiad is unconscionable, and would involve turning from and forsaking the other even as we grieve for them. Turning away from our ecological predicament in such a mode would constitute a form of literary negation, foreclosure and totalisation which ethical elegy must strive to resist.

Spahr’s ‘Gentle Now’ performs a movement that can be understood as resisting such a turn, even as its speaker herself narrates turning from the stream in favour of other objects. In looking back to recall a time before the degradation of the stream and her relation to it, Spahr’s speaker presents an image of profound, if ideal, ecological interconnection that is metonymic:

The stream had no name but it began from a spring and flowed down a hill into the Scioto that then flowed into the Ohio that then flowed into the Mississippi that then flowed into the Gulf of Mexico.

The stream was a part of us and we were a part of the stream and we were thus part of the rivers and thus part of the gulfs and the oceans.

\textsuperscript{31} In correspondence to Rose’s foregrounding of dialogue, Watkin (2004:223), speaking to ethical modes of writing about human death rather eco-loss, foregrounds conversation, while both emphasise these modes as forms of encounter with otherness.
And we began to learn the stream.

(…)

We mimicked the catlike meow, the soft quirt or kwut, and the louder, grating ratchet calls of the gray catbird.

We put our heads together.

We put our heads together with all these things, with the caddisfly larva, with the creek chub and the slenderhead darter, with the horsechestnut and the larch, with the gray catbird.

We put our heads together on a narrow pillow, on a stone, on a narrow stone pillow, and we talked to each other all day long, because we loved.

We loved the stream.

And we were of the stream (1997:124-5).

Spahr’s poetics are also ecological here in the poem’s attendance not only to the interconnection of a wider environment but to the singular forms that constitute this whole, forms which are specifically named and counted—‘the horsechestnut’, ‘the gray catbird’. The sense of mutual implication between the speaker and the ecosystem of the stream continues when the speaker attests to the refuse and pollutants that affect the stream, things that sometimes ‘knowingly’ and sometimes ‘unknowingly’ were ‘let into’ the stream, and thus also ‘let into our hearts’: ‘We let in soda cans and we let in cigarette butts and we let in pink/tampon applicators (1997:129)’; ‘We let the runoff from agriculture, surface mines, forestry (1997:129) into our hearts’; ‘We let chloride, magnesium, sulphate, manganese, iron, nitrite/nitrate, aluminium, suspended solids (…) go through our skin and into our tissues’ (1997:129). This naming and counting of the discrete and disparate things both ‘knowingly’ and ‘unknowingly’ ‘let into’ into the stream constitutes an intense, unflinching scrutiny of destructive human intervention in delicately balanced ecological systems, an intervention which, in wagering the health of the stream, wagers also the physical and emotional health of the people near it. As Spahr’s speaker admits, ‘These things were a part of us and would become more a part of us but/We did not know it yet/Still we noticed enough to sing a lament’ (1997:129). The speaker’s reference to this lament is inscribed with an understanding of the metonymic interdependence of the life forms within the stream’s ecosystem, whereby the loss of one risks another: ‘To
sing in lament for whoever lost her elephant ear lost her mountain madtom/and whoever lost her butterfly lost her harelip sucker’ (1997:129). In the final part of ‘Gentle Now’, the speaker traces her turn from the stream and her realisation of the untotalisable enormity of the loss at stake:

What I did not know as I sang the lament of what was becoming lost and what was already lost was how this loss would happen.
I did not know that I would turn from the stream to each other.
I did not know I would turn to each other.
That I would turn to each other to admire the softness of each other’s breast, the folds of each other’s elbows (…)
Ensnared, bewildered, I turned to each other and from the stream.
I turned to each other and I began to work for the chemical factory and I began to work for the papermill (…)

The speaker’s mournful, if suppressed, realisation of her complicity in losing the stream by turning from it in favour of attachments to human lovers, work that directly contributes to polluting the stream, and consumer objects such as ‘a crystal Serenity Sphere with a Winter Stream view’ appears to hover on the verge of a reckoning too enormous to begin (1997:130). Says the speaker, ‘I replaced what I knew of the stream with Lifestream Total Cholesterol/ Test Packets, with Snuggle Emerald Stream Fabric Softener Dryer/Sheets’ (1997:130). In turning toward these things and away from the stream, the speaker explains that ‘I didn’t even say goodbye to elephant ear, mountain madtom, butterfly,/ Harelip sucker, white catspaw, rabbitsfoot, monkeyface (…)’ (1997:130). Having followed the movement of loss from a prior time of Edenic congruence between self and stream, through its pollution and the speaker’s eventual complicity in its degradation, ‘Gentle Now’ closes in suspending itself on the verge of a mourning yet to come, of a loss too enormous for understanding. Following the negation of the stream implicated its her turn from it, the speaker’s testimony moves from idealistic affirmation to negative utterance:

I just turned to each other and the body parts of each other suddenly glowed with the beauty and detail that I had found in the stream.

(…)

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And I did not sing.
I did not sing otototoi; dark, all merged together, oi.
I did not sing the groaning words.
(….)
I did not sing o wo, wo, wo! (1997:131)

While Spahr’s speaker does not look forward to visualise the implications of the stream’s present degradation in view of future loss, the elegy ends on the brink of its reckoning, with the speaker’s repetitive refrains about what she ‘did not sing’. While the speaker narrates her turn from and forsaking of the stream, the speaker is mournfully conscious of this turn, which is inscribed in the poem as implicated in the degradation of the stream. As such, the unutterable, arrested grief with which the poem ends is a grief not only of loss but of guilt in being complicit in this loss. The course of the poem, from Edenic ideal to mournful reality, or, to echo Ronda, from non-agency to agency, enacts the speaker’s gradual realisation of this agency, the weight of which bears on the poem’s end, unresolved. Even as the speaker narrates her turn from and sublimation of the stream through her attachment to material things and a human lover, her stark articulation of the mourning cries she ‘did not sing’ registers the dumbfounding impact of the loss and deprivation she has borne and participated in. The impossibility of mourning of which Derrida so incisively speaks is embodied in Spahr’s poem, which recognises and testifies to the speaker’s complicity and implication with the fate of the stream even as she hesitates (or is unable) to fully do so. Despite the disconnect between the poem’s witness and the speaker’s understanding, Spahr’s elegy recognises the singularity of the stream’s many life forms, and the speaker’s metonymic implication with and answerability to its degradation.

Melancholia is invoked by both Morton and Ronda as an alternative to the bounded and consolatory (subject-object) mourning paradigm of traditional elegy and early mourning theory of Freud, however I suggest that alternate terms—such as “negative”, “non-consolatory”, “endless”, or “impossible” mourning—used in place of melancholia, might eschew some of the complications posed by this term. This is true particularly in light of the tendency in discussions of melancholia to reiterate Freud’s early dichotomous framing of “pathological” melancholia (and incorporation) as distinct from “normative” mourning (and introjection). By
contrast, as has been argued, Derrida’s conception of mourning as an ethical negotiation between two infidelities to the other offers a more viable framework for approaching ethical eco-elegy. An ethical poetics of eco-elegy entails not only recognising the impossibility of mourning as a process that can ever be completed, but also recognising that the enactment of both “normative” and “melancholic” mourning in writing about nature involve forms of ethical compromise. If we are to write at all, we must negotiate between these modes. In doing so, we must be precise about the different forms of loss of which we are thinking and writing. We must negotiate between writing of our interdependence, implication and intimacy with ecological systems, and writing in such a way that recognises the singularity, difference and distance of nonhuman life forms and processes. In doing so, we must speak to possible future loss, without turning too far from the vital contingency of this moment in our ecological predicament—what has been lost already and, more urgently, what is at this instant in the process of being lost. In turning too far, in imagining a post-apocalyptic, dystopian future, with all the novelty and spectacle that such speculative visions command, some cli-fi novels risk placing such future visions at a distance from our present, at the expense of foregrounding the urgency of what is at stake now, and our human implication in these stakes. Despite the unseemly potential of elegy to further negate loss, perhaps, as a literary mode galvanised by the emotion of grief and the felt register of what it is we have lost, are losing, and have yet to lose, eco-elegy is in fact better positioned than cli-fi to resist losing sight of the pain, difficulty and urgency of our present contingent ecological predicament.

While Spahr’s ‘Gentle Now’ is a sophisticated example of such an eco-elegiac negotiation in poetry, Cormac McCarthy’s The Road (2006) is an example of a novel that enacts a movement that can be considered as eco-elegiac, and which, in different ways, also testifies to the enormity of what we as a species are wagering to lose. Unlike Spahr, whose elegy teeters on the brink of an untold further loss to come, McCarthy presents a possible future vision of loss, conceivable in light of our current trajectory and yet less explicit in its reckoning with specifically environmental concerns. While post-apocalyptic, The Road does not explicitly address the issue of climate change and as such does not constitute typical cli-fi. Further, the nature of the disaster that precipitated the bleak world the characters inhabit is only outlined—widespread fires, followed by an apparent nuclear
winter. Whatever role humanity played in this cataclysm, the world McCarthy envisions is a world in which the living processes and organisms that constitute ecological existence are lost beyond redemption. The same event that incinerated the land and the oceans, and caused even the sun to vanish from the earth, incinerated or otherwise caused the extinction of most other living beings, humans included. Moreover, *The Road* diverges from much cli-fi in the simplicity and limitations of its narrative scope. Rather than presenting a detailed scenario of a future dystopic society affected by climate change, with its intricate cultural, economic, political and technological realities, *The Road* follows a father and a son, struggling to survive in a hostile landscape as they travel south toward the coast in the hope of escaping the worsening cold. In a world reduced to a sparse population of fugitive survivors, themselves on the brink of death from cold and hunger, this nameless “man” and “boy” are ‘each the other’s world entire’. Living in terror of the cannibal armies who stalk the road in search of human prey, they try desperately to hold onto their humanity in a world in which hope itself has been lost. Despite the novel’s being set in the near future, the world which *The Road* presents through the experience of the man and boy ceaselessly recalls the world that is lost, the world that is not, with the immediacy, vibrancy and beauty with which things appear in their absence:

He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds. Lying there in the dark with the uncanny taste of a peach from some phantom orchard fading in his mouth. He thought if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory (2007:17).

The narrative present time of *The Road* is in reality a speculative projection of our near future, while the past time, which haunts the narrative through the man's painful memories, constitutes our present. Unlike some works of cli-fi or speculative fiction which imagine ecological apocalypse, the elegiac movement of *The Road* grounds its narrative in a kind of fidelity to the urgency of our present reality. The man constantly looks back:
In those first years the roads were peopled with refugees shrouded up in their clothing. (...) Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland. The frailty of everything revealed at last (2007:28).

Rather than focusing on establishing a vision of a future dystopic civilisation, McCarthy's novel attends to the immediate aftermath of an ecological cataclysm in the world we live in now. While in cli-fi such scenarios are imagined in order to comment on our present reality, too often this movement risks presenting a spectacle to be marvelled at for its derisive wit, novelty and invention rather than for its warning, risking placing our present moment at a distance from this imagined future. The world presented in The Road is still recognisable, and there is no invention to distract from its reckoning with the devastation of recent loss.

Certainly, McCarthy’s novel does enact a kind of mourning for, in Morton’s words, ‘that which will have passed given a continuation of the current state of affairs’ (2010:254). However, The Road constitutes an example of an elegiac movement that challenges Morton’s argument that ecological apocalypticism ‘always imagine[s] total destruction from some impossible imaginary vantage point’ (2010:254). The vantage point of such a ‘future anterior’ (Morton, 2010:254) is of course “impossible” in that one can only speculate on a loss that hasn’t yet happened (and to which there might be no human witnesses) through the creative imagination—but this is the value of literature. The simple act of imagining future catastrophic ecological loss does not determine a work of elegy as unethical. Morton is too glib when he generalises of such works that ‘[t]he content may be lamentation, but the subject position is passive enjoyment’ (2010:254). While individual readers may approach The Road in such a manner, the narrative itself inherently resists offering itself to such a reading. This is evidenced in the way that, for all its glimpses of almost carnivalesque dystopian horror—newborns roasting on spits and deranged amputee prisoners being harvested slowly for their flesh by cannibal survivors—McCarthys places these images within a context too close to home, too feasibly possible to be consumed easily as mere titillation in the manner of a Hollywood horror film. The horror of such scenes, which appear so starkly only sparingly and even then just in a few lines, and which is more often only intimated within the narrative, is a horror that bears too closely on our predicament now, and upon us, to be consumed so
lightly. *The Road*’s elegiac movement is reflexive in that the horror of the future that McCarthy depicts is a horror in which we are implicated now, and it is inscribed with fear for a future which remains contingent. In reckoning with this fear, *The Road* resists smearing over the urgent moment between our present crisis and our uncertain future. Through the memories of the man, which run like touchstones throughout the novel’s course, we are constantly called to register what has been lost. In doing so, *The Road* foregrounds what is at stake, the vital immediacy of everything we have yet to lose, even the familiar sun, whose daily rising and setting we take for granted, and which is suddenly made strange when the man experiences the bright light emanating from a fire:

Everything was alight. As if the lost sun were returning at last. (...) The colour of it moved something in him long forgotten. Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember (2007:31).

Whether eco-elegy projects forward to imagine future ecological catastrophe as does *The Road*, or hesitates on the brink of glimpsing such a future, as does ‘Gentle Now’, the ethics of such elegy hinge on the degree to which they maintain proximity to the contingency and urgency of our present moment of crisis, the loss that hasn’t yet happened but the prospect of which must be urgently reckoned with. While *The Road* hesitates to foreground the sense of human culpability and guilt as starkly as does ‘Gentle Now’, the narrative remains inscribed with a sense of answerability to the catastrophe that has befallen Earth (or at least North America), as implicit in the man’s remembering of the early days of the disaster:

By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road. What had they done? He thought that in the history of the world it might even be that there was more punishment than crime but he took small comfort from it (2007:33).

The final passage of *The Road* underscores the way in which its elegiac movement foregrounds and faces this urgency, looking to what in the novel has been lost beyond redemption, yet which remains for us in reality at stake, and not looking away:
Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains…They smelled of moss in your hand…On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery (2007:306-7).

In evocative, sensuous and physical detail, this passage recalls a sense of intimacy and interdependency with the animate natural world, a world of vital complexity and sustenance, which the incinerated landscape of the man and boy's reality has replaced. In this way, The Road speaks to an understanding of ecological loss as an unutterable diminishment of complexity and experience.

Both ‘Gentle Now’ and The Road present mournful, unflinching, and non-consolatory elegiac testaments to ecological loss. While ‘Gentle Now’ hesitates from envisioning the future of the stream’s ecology, and The Road projects forward to imagine the aftermath of an ecological apocalypse in our near future, each constitutes an ethical form of elegy. Inscribed within each is an attendance to, and a grave reckoning with the contingency of ecological loss, in addition to loss that has occurred and loss that is in-process. ‘Gentle Now’ stages this reckoning in the present moment, from which the speaker at first looks back to remember a time before loss, then reflects upon present reality before concluding in the open question of a mourning to come. By contrast, the reckoning enacted by The Road occurs in a possible near future, while repeatedly looking back to remember a time in the novel’s recent past before everything was lost—a time which in reality constitutes our present.

In each movement, the time before loss upon which the narrator looks back is cast in a mythical light for its being beyond recapture. In ‘Gentle Now’, this past appears mythical not only because of its being situated at an earlier point in the degradation of the stream, but, as Ronda suggests, because of the speaker’s idealising of the stream and her relation to it in childhood as remembered from a present position of disenchanted, mournful knowingness. Conversely, in The Road, the past as remembered by the man appears mythical due precisely to the way that the ecological loss that is in our present reality contingent and incipient is, in the world of the novel, almost completely foregone. While different, both of these movements of looking back to a time of possession and presence, preceding
a present moment of loss and absence, foreground the urgency of what we have
still to lose, while resisting the urge to console for, provide closure for, or totalise
a mourning and grief which cannot be foreclosed. Each seems to pose the question
of what we are to do now, and how we are to answer for our present conundrum,
while eschewing self-righteous indignation or the urge to achieve closure by
offering simplistic answers.

In these ways, both ‘Gentle Now’ and The Road constitute disparate examples
of elegiac movements that resist the sacrificial negation of traditional elegy in
their negative, non-consolatory mourning. In facing the difficult and (temporally)
divergent reality of ecological loss and not looking away—and in bearing a sense
of answerability for this loss, without presuming to be (yet) capable of answering
to it—both works resist the Orphic turn, and delineate the varied potential for an
ethical poetics of eco-elegy in poetry and prose.
Conclusions

*We must do something but what*

– Brenda Hillman, *Practical Water*

Leninist posters peeling in a rotting kindergarten, a Ferris wheel frozen for nearly thirty years, ruined villages glimpsed through pine trees—such eerie apparitions of tragedy, encountered in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, only hint at the scale of loss caused by the 1986 nuclear disaster. And yet, such reminders coexist with the strange and peaceful beauty of a depopulated environment of regenerating forest and returning wildlife. Uniquely unencumbered by humans, an ecosystem still ravaged by nuclear radiation is by increments reclaiming the austere concrete landscape of an ambitiously planned Soviet town, farmlands long cultivated for food production, and the surrounding villages which had stood for centuries. Grey wolves, once rare in the area, have found refuge, and are known to congregate in the ghost villages, to spy on elk from abandoned rooftops. The Zone at once constitutes an unprecedented warning of the consequences we wager in wreaking havoc on our natural environment, and, in its present existence as a haven for wildlife once rare in the area, a reminder of what we have to lose. Chernobyl’s existence as such a haven suggests that the presence of humans is more debilitating to populations of wolves and bears than nuclear irradiation, and as such is testament to the disastrous degree to which our very way of life constricts the ability of other beings in our midst to exist and thrive in a shared ecosystem.

The scale of loss precipitated by the Chernobyl disaster—which has been followed so recently by the 2011 Fukushima disaster—and which is risked by countless other forms of ecological devastation, including that which is implicated in global warming, confounds our customary modes of accounting for loss in language, and tests the limits of language itself. The forms of loss which have long moved writers to create elegiac literature, and critics to ponder it, have
traditionally pertained—as Freud says of mourning and melancholia—to ‘the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on’ (1917:243). Like other forms of discourse, elegiac literature is only beginning to reckon with the registers of loss implicated by the global ecological threat posed by climate change, overpopulation and an unsustainable economic system predicated on the unchecked exploitation of finite natural resources. The loss of a viable climate, of air quality, of wildlife habitat and of biodiversity are just some of the losses we are wagering in continuing to overpopulate and exploit our planet’s fragile, finite and interconnected ecosystems. How do we navigate the writing of elegy when the environment in which loss occurs, which structures our comprehension of loss and which animates the figures of elegiac language, is itself at stake? How do we mourn for something that is not yet “fully” lost? To write eco-elegy is not only to reckon with these questions, but also, in a sense, to elegise elegy itself. When the environment itself is at stake as the object of elegy, we are in the realm of meta-elegy. If traditional elegy enacts an impossible movement, which reaches toward the restoration of one who is lost beyond restoration, then the task of eco-elegy is at once more and less impossible—and certainly, more urgent.

Led by the same preoccupations that define *The Counterpart*, this essay has considered the question of how to reckon responsibly with ecological loss in elegiac literature. As ecological loss, understood variously as a foregone event and as a future prospect in an age of global warming, increasingly compels writers to write elegiac literature, it is not only the formal operations of traditional elegy that are called into question. Ethical eco-elegy entails a reckoning with our responsibilities in elegising non-human others, and calls for a careful attendance to the divergency of ecological loss, which is at once more contingent and more total than elegy’s traditional frames of reference encompass. Despite the burgeoning disciplines of ecocriticism and ecopoetics, greater critical attention is called for in examining the intersection between elegy, ecology and ethics. In particular, further discussion within creative writing studies, of eco-elegy as a creative practice and ethics at work not only within poetry but also within prose, would be a valuable course with broad applications to the related disciplines of elegy studies and the environmental humanities. The two notable essays, discussed herein, by Morton and Ronda respectively—while located outside a
direct focus upon writerly practice—offer provocative grounds for such further discussion in thinking an ethical poetics of eco-elegy within and without Creative Writing Studies. However, both Morton and Ronda hesitate from defining more precisely the divergent nature of ecological loss as a subject for elegy, and do not speak to the way that elegy exists also as a movement within prose. Moreover, both frame their consideration of the poetics of eco-elegy within Freud’s conception of melancholia, when in fact such a poetics calls for a more rigorous dialogue with the philosophies of mourning, thanatopoetics and environmental criticism than such a framing offers.

This essay has aimed to propose, primarily through Derridean mourning theory and the allegory of the Orphic turn, a framework through which to rethink how we as writers might respond ethically to ecological loss in elegiac poetry and prose. In focusing upon this broader framework through which to think the possibilities for writing ethical eco-elegy, a greater attendance to the intricacies of the varied formal, stylistic and aesthetic manoeuvres by which such a writing might be achieved has been beyond the scope of this discussion. However, despite the infrequency of (eco)elegy as a form being directly addressed, various thinkers within creative writing studies and the environmental humanities speak incisively to the specifics of such manoeuvres, by which a more ecologically mindful writing might be approached. In the recent ecologically-focused special issue of the creative writing studies journal TEXT, Martin Harrison offers a detailed list of ‘conditions’ which might pertain to ‘writing which fulfils some order of ecological requirement’ on both ‘formal’ and ‘aesthetic’ registers (2013:10). These conditions involve a variety of elements, such as ‘an undetermined, evolving, ergodic or not fully resolved form’, ‘a reference-level which explicitly opens up a field within an environment’ and ‘a way of positioning discourse outside of the discursive self’ (2013:10). In the same issue, Deborah Bird Rose emphasises dialogue as ‘a form of ethical practice amongst subjects (human and nonhuman)’ (2013:7). Elsewhere, Michael J. McDowell draws attention to the relevance of Bakhtinian narrative techniques in ecological writing to foreground ‘the dialogic voices in a landscape’ (1996:386). Morton too (if only in passing), in his analysis of Shelley’s Alastor, notes the way that ‘untagged direct speech’ offers a means of ‘open[ing] up’ to the nonhuman other (while eschewing, I would add, a certain presumption in speaking for the other) (2010:260). With the
exception of Morton, however, none of these essays address elegy or eco-elegy specifically, despite their relevance to the form—a further indication of the value of more directed scholarly discussion surrounding eco-elegiac poetics and ethics.

In proposing a framework through which to rethink an ethical poetics of eco-elegy, I have examined the way that, in enacting a movement contingent on the absence of its object, elegy as a literary form is implicated in a complex ethical conundrum, converging around the question of what we, as writers, critics and readers, owe to the other whose absence we elegise. This traditional elegiac movement, identifiable within poetry and prose, on the levels of literary language and mourning, works to further negate the other whose loss the elegy mourns, while foregrounding the materiality of literary language through tropes such as metaphor and metonymy. As Watkin (2004) suggests, the differences between metaphor and metonymy as structures of relation between tenor and vehicle correspond to the differences between Freudian mourning and the mourning model espoused by Bowlby (1980), in the relation between mourning subject and lost object/other. While metaphor involves opposition and substitution, metonymy hinges on a proximate relation while preserving the separateness of each entity, and as such suggests, for Watkin, a more ethical mode of relation to the other in representing mourning through literature. Moreover, the negotiation between both intimacy and distance within metonymic relation between whole and part corresponds to understandings of ecology as a structure of relations predicated on both the interdependence and separateness of the discrete organisms and processes that constitute the greater structure.

In considering the way that elegy is further complicated when the object of loss is ecological, and in view of Morton’s essay, I have argued that an ethical poetics of eco-elegy calls for a more precise consideration of the divergent forms of ecological loss which we are facing in our global ecological crisis. This includes loss that is not only forgone as in traditional elegy, but loss that is, variously, in-process, contingent and incipient. Further, I have emphasised that an ethical poetics of eco-elegy must involve a greater attendance to our human culpability and answerability in light of this loss. Additionally, I have critiqued the application of melancholia by Morton and Ronda to the poetics of eco-elegy, arguing that this historically loaded term, inadequately qualified, risks perpetuating the binary opposition between introjection and incorporation, and
between mourning subject and lost other which structures Freud’s problematic understanding of mourning. As such, I have preferred alternate terms in referring to grief that resists consolation and closure, such as “negative”, “endless”, and “non-consolatory mourning”.

In advancing these claims, I have sought to show how Derrida’s complex understanding of mourning, as both a law of living friendship and as a metonymic relation to the dead other, provides a framework more able to account for the nuance and paradox of ecological loss, mourning and elegiac commemoration. In expanding the conception of mourning to encompass ‘the anguished apprehension’ (1997:14) of a loss that is to come, Derrida makes provision for the contingency of much of the ecological loss that provokes mournful attention in elegiac literature. This conception of mourning as an ethical condition structuring the relation of love, hospitality or friendship to the other while they are alive, in addition to when they are dead and only “in us”, extends mourning to account for the continuum of contingent or incipient loss, loss in-process and loss that has occurred, which bear on eco-elegy.

Moreover, Derrida’s metonymic conception of mourning as a relational process of difficult negotiation between maintaining intimacy with the other, and preserving their singularity, offers a more nuanced framework for thinking an ethical poetics of eco-elegy. This framework complicates the influential opposition (made distinct in Freud’s early mourning theory) between normative and melancholic mourning, by recognising the duty of ethical mourning as an unavoidable negotiation between these modes, each involving a form of violence to the other being mourned. Such a comprehension of mourning comes closer to acknowledging not only the divergency of ecological loss, but the way that mourning, and thus elegy, understandably bear upon divergent forms of ecological loss. An ethical poetics of ecological elegy must recognise how “loss” names not simply the sudden lack of a finite thing but the loss of the opportunity for the continuation of a series of encounters, by which we engage with the alterity of a living other. That is, we must expand our understanding of eco-loss to encompass not only the contingency of such loss, but the way that such loss is also constitutive of a loss of contingency, brought about when a unique other is no longer alive in the world. In this light, it is possible to see how the signifiers “nature” and “ecology” also stand in for a series, functioning as a meta-noun for
an endless constellation of relationships. To speak of “losing nature”/ecology, then, is to speak of losing the opportunity for the continuation of a series of encounters with nature. This expanded conception of loss is rooted in the understanding of loss as fundamentally a deprivation or diminishment of experience and complexity.

The event of a global nuclear holocaust or some such total devastation is an endpoint we must at once hold in mind and yet be wary of accelerating toward in our literatures. In reality, such an apocalypse may not leave human witnesses. The reality of our interdependence with nature is such that, as long as we are here, alive on Earth, to speak of “losing nature” is to speak of the loss of integral, singular parts of a greater structure, loss which risks the structure but—crucially—does not yet constitute such a total loss. Accordingly, we must continue to speak of the singular deprivation of being unable to encounter the creature that is the Tasmanian Tiger, or the living organism that constitutes the Great Barrier Reef. As these examples indicate, “loss” in this framework can signify an irreversible, foregone event of extinction, or an insidious degradation or imperilment currently in-process, along the trajectory of total loss. Spahr’s naming and repetitive listing of the names of various organisms within the stream’s ecology is a mode of recognizing the singularity of forms that constitute a greater structure. As Derrida’s discussion of Barthes’s elegiac Camera Lucida suggests, metonymy allows for us to speak of the part in relation to the whole, the singular in relation to the general—and in doing so, to transport ideas, to affect, disturb, and move. Smearing over the difference between singular instances of loss by writing of eco-loss in generalist terms, and smearing over the distance that separates this present moment from a moment fifty or two hundred years hence in which we imagine the end of the world—are ethically problematic approaches to writing eco-loss.

Despite the validity of such cautions, however, the contingency of much ecological loss demands that elegy also reckon with the loss that is to come, be it loss that is impossible to prevent or contingent on our interim actions. The recent emergence of cli-fi—fiction that deals with the implications of climate change, often in the relatively near future—testifies to the increasing effect of ecological emergency on our literatures. The intricately plotted, speculative and highly inventive aspect of some such fiction, however, has the potential to create a
distance from our present reality, pursuing escapist apocalyptic thrill at the risk of smearing over the urgent, liminal moment of our present ecological crisis, in which the level of devastation we face (beyond what seems already assured) is contingent on what we do now. By contrast, literature which is grounded in (non-consolatory) elegy’s movement of relation between past and present, and its register of the ongoing cost of loss, seems better placed to reckon with what is at stake in the climate change we are only beginning to discern. As exemplified by Mc Carthy’s *The Road*, envisioning eco-apocalypse in elegiac literature does not necessarily constitute a lack of ethics. Rather, the degree to which such a literature is ethical hinges on the degree of proximity it maintains, in imagining future apocalypse, to the contingency and urgency of our present moment of crisis, and the degree to which it resists totalising or foreclosing a mourning that exceeds such measures. While it hesitates from proffering easy answers, ethical eco-elegiac literature is also inscribed with a recognition of human answerability to the ecological loss it laments, so much of which still remains contingent on us.

Eurydice is lost because Orpheus is blinded by ‘the fire of [his] own presence’, by his desire to master her otherness, and to recreate her in his own image in elegy (Doolittle, 1983:52). Turning away, Orpheus chooses to walk back into the daylight of earth bereaved and alone, when he might have walked alongside living Eurydice. As Doolittle’s Eurydice says to Orpheus: ‘So you have swept me back, / I who could have walked with the live souls above the earth’ (1983:52). The dichotomy of human versus other-than-human nature, of civilisation versus wildlife, which the territory surrounding Chernobyl before and after human evacuation so radically attests to, constitutes a denial of—and a turning away from—our own interdependence and enrichment by other-than-human nature. This denial, which imperils us all, hinges on a fundamental neglect of care and responsibility to animate, agential ecological beings and processes that are other-than-human, and also to ourselves. In elegy as in life, in the face of a biosphere at stake, we must resist the urge to turn away. After all, what good are the mourning songs of an Orpheus who no longer has a world to sing to?
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Appendix: additional figures

Figure 4: Abandoned buildings – Pripyat, Chernobyl (R. Todd, 2013)
Figure 5: Dodgems – Pripyat, Chernobyl (R. Todd, 2013)

Figure 6: Sunlit Chair in Hospital – Pripyat, Chernobyl (L. Lee, 2014)
Figure 7: Child’s Single Shoe – Pripyat, Chernobyl (L. Lee, 2014)