

Obits

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Abstract

Obits

By Tess Liem

Obits explores themes of mourning, memorial, and identity. It is a collection of intertextual prose poems in which a speaker attempts and fails to write obituaries for women and others whose obituaries or memorials are missing, or only represented as statistics. The speaker also discusses what she sees as a failure to mourn her aunt, a woman who she knows less about than any of the people she researches; and finally she tries to give an account of herself as a lyric poet in mourning. That is, she asks, what does it mean to be an “I” mourning a “you” when both of us have been ‘othered’ and the act of writing might be an act of othering in itself?

Ultimately the speaker notes a pattern in the failures to mourn certain identities publicly and the political consequences of this failure for a group as small as a family or as large as a nation or as various as an academic discipline. With respect to the collection being intertextual it means that much of the research is directly quoted in the work. The main texts guiding and influencing this collection include but are not limited to Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*; Claudia Rankine’s *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*; Sina Queyras’ *MxT*; Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, and *Giving an Account of Oneself*; Jill Stauffer’s *Ethical Loneliness*; and Sigmund Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia*. My approach is meant to connect the work of mourning and memorial to elegy and the lyric poet by focussing on where there is an absence or lack of acknowledgement of certain losses and certain bodies.

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~

Thank you to Anstruther Press for publishing “Saw in Half.”

~

I live on the traditional territory of the Kanien’kehá:ka people. The island called *Montreal* is known as Tiotia:ke in the language of the Kanien’kehá:ka and I am grateful to be able to study on this land.

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There is no innovating loss. It was never invented, it happened as something physical, something physically experienced. It is not something an "I" discusses socially.

-Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*

~

Loss has made a tenuous "we" of us all
-Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*

Not

My loss of you was not spectacular.
As a child, I thought your existence
a curious assumption, an affair
reserved for Sundays. There was no solace

knowing you were—like they said—*everywhere*.
My belief in you was somehow faithless
so I didn't notice your departure,
I wasn't lost or blind in your absence.

But I wish you had left me all at once
so I could know the hot betrayal of an all
encompassing event, something to dull
these little pains of living. But my fall:

quiet, slow. My life easy as a leaf in October.
How it will gather, whirl, crack & crumble.

I

No one agrees on the number

It may look like melancholia when the object of my mourning is missing. When there is no obituary printed. When she is missing. When she is missing she is still missed. When we hear it, it may sound like melancholia as if there is no loss. Sometimes I am not listening. To mourn a loss is to say we had something in the first place. To remember is to try to put something back together. To be melancholic is like being lost. Being melancholic is like being lost. Mourning isn't like anything. But if the object is missing, as in I could never see her, she was never visible, she was invisible, she was not counted, she didn't count, it took too long to note her absence, & now her absence-presence. No one agrees on the number. Well, she is missing & I am melancholic, & I haven't been listening. & then some man explains this distinction between mourning & melancholia to me, citing Žižek as if I have never read Freud & wouldn't recognize the source or seeming sourcelessness of my own melancholia.

Obit

An obsolete. & what to do with
bits of news, quick footage on screens

subtitled, underground, on our commute.
Obits add up, like say seventy-four

some summer day. That number
revised, rises. Obit, an arithmetic.

We get on the train, shoulder to shoulder
we go downtown. I count

how many people
are too close to me.

Show us the bodies.
Tell us their names.

I love you obits when you
disappear you're easier to miss.

Long division

Again, against.
& again, gaps between just two things.

Maybe dividing things in two
is all we can forgive.

Putting back together any more than two
may be too much to ask.

Dead is that & living is this.
Absence is presence-absence.

To cleave is to divide or to hold close.

~

To cleave is

to adhere, like to a rule,
closely, like an owl's eyes following a mouse,

or loyally, like a wife to a wife,
or unwaveringly,

like a lake to a shore, sort of.
To divide, like an election,

as if by a cutting blow,
like a bruise to your ego.

Only there are actual scars on bodies.
To split along the grain.

It may look like melancholia when the object of my mourning is missing

Are you waiting for me to leave so you can harvest your tomatoes? Did you know you were going anywhere when you planted them? Did you leave them here to remind me that you never actually left? We hid you. Not on purpose. I want someone to answer these questions. I want someone to help me settle into your presence-absence. You were here, it seemed like forever, like there was no time when you weren't here & even now. Hidden. Roots. You did not forget these things, we both know, you won't. Is it a wish or a fantasy to hope I find you one day slicing tomatoes in our kitchen.

I asked myself to acknowledge that this was an expression of some kind of loneliness. Lonely not alone, talking to myself, under my breath. How many days have I lost. I started to record every thing I did, including the five minutes I spent on the floor looking under the bed for an earring that didn't belong to me or my lover. An object I thought I saw catch light four weeks or four days ago. I want to understand what is going on when nothing is going on & there is dust on my chest.

~

But to say I am disappointed would be to imply I expected something & I won't admit to it. I will say instead I hoped I would be better. I will say instead I wish I could be good at one thing. Even being good at

grief would feel like an accomplishment. I will say instead I hoped I would lose less time to this mourning for which the object appears to be missing. I will say I knew I was a ghost.

~

On the one hand there is mourning to be done, on the other hand there is searching. It is the ambiguity of '*lost*' describing something which both can & cannot be recovered.

Bad luck elegy

Is it bad luck to mourn someone who is not dead? Is it bad luck to mourn someone who is not dead hoping it kills him? Is it bad luck to mourn someone you do not miss—

I mean what happens when a bad thing falls. Descent might be accompanied by an elegy, too. I have never not once seen him since I quit working the cash at that store in that city. So if he were dead I wouldn't know it. So the world, my world, would look the same if my rapist were dead. But his death surprisingly not something I fantasize.

If all my friends' rapists were dead then what. Maybe E. wouldn't have to see J. at the park & leave before he notices her.

Maybe that'd be pretty good. Maybe we'd take their ashes cover our feet, show everyone & it would be enough. How would we mourn them.

Best to get it out of the way, to smash a mirror while yelling their names instead. Best to note the what? The absurdity? What is the word for something that belongs to you, is yours, that was given to you to hold, given without asking. Given too gentle a word. It belongs to you without belonging.

Here, she appears

It is notable that Freud never uses the female pronoun in *Mourning and Melancholia* except when a female appears in the example of “a betrothed girl who has been jilted” because “melancholia, too, may be the reaction to the loss of a loved object.” Her lover a lost object. Her lover’s love. Her lover’s fortune. Her lover’s reputation. There are worse things to lose. Like your pants for example. Like maybe she never took a lover to begin with, but a lover took her & we understood the result of this to be melancholia.

It’s not always a lover who jilts though. It's not like love is a pre-requisite to jilt someone. You might just jilt because you can. It’s a transitive verb, but I have more ways of talking about the jilted, who so often is the jilt, more than I do the jilters. Because jilt is also a noun, like *jillet*, from French, a flirtatious girl. She is both. Jilt & jilted. Jillet & jealous. No etymology so perfect as to hear 'jail' in 'jilt'. & well who cares about those melancholy flirts anyway.

Here, she reappears

The disturbance of self regard is absent in mourning
-Sigmund Freud

Wrong. There is glitter in the escalator
and for a moment, I am euphoric,

distracted by the light
catching in the cracks because

I am away from myself for as long as it takes
to get down to the platform

where all the people are
where we gather together every day

as if it is no big deal
where I watch some screen

& read all about some other
place where the air is bad with obits

that will not be written up.
I return to myself

so I guess I have to stop
telling people I am mourning.

Elegy for hers

Her heels: mountain peaks.
She sleeps on her stomach

one arm under the pillow
under her head, finally still

after working all night
the dawn passes without song

only her yawn. Hers, yes. In sleep

she clings to his rambled demands
& his weather. Yes, his.

& her bones, they hold enough
or too much. Her attention feathers.

Pine & fir: the roughest clouds:
hers.

Quiet, giddy.

Obit

A motion,
an exit, though I notice

many of the fire escapes
in Montreal

are stairs within storage spaces
that lead to other storage spaces

& I fantasize about riding the metro
all day, as if

its motion might
move me.

If you're like me

*How lovely and how doomed this connection of
everyone with lungs.*

-Juliana Spahr

If you're barely paying attention

obits are counted daily & you could list them

to take inventory

I thought to do this in some moment of conceptual
energy

to measure the distance felt & how it correlates with
the numbers

~

If you're barely paying attention

you don't ask to see bodies or imagine them

unless it is some exercise in thinking

~

If you're barely paying attention

like me

you see death as numbers in the news

if you're like me

you imagine bodies lined up from head to toe

to understand the distance between this here & that
there

to imagine distance

this sensationalism showing you the bodies

a sensation in your body

~

I blame the news & the distance I've imagined

When I grieve the transcendence of a body into a number

Because in this I do not grieve the body or the vulnerability of others

I do not notice what Butler calls the *uneven distribution of corporeal vulnerability*

~

It is uneven. It is not like anything.

To analogize or to make metaphor of obits feels like another kind of cognitive dissonance.

A distancing. A longing.

The metaphor comparing one dead thing to another dead thing.

What else do we need revealed about dead things.

OK fuck ok.

What else do we need annealed.

Connect this to your body.

~

To speak as if we all share the same loveliness, the same doom is

Not to speak of the fact that while we all breathe the same air

Some people have their hands around other's necks

~

A stone in someone's pocket

How I thought of shock, too. How not new. How I thought that anyone who has barely been paying attention knew that atrocities persist, so to speak. Obits, a persistence, continuing, repeating, & those who felt violence on their bodies did not need the results of an election to prove that everything is fucked. Just to be reminded. Still in shock. Or I was astonished, like *astonished* in the Don McKay sense: I felt like a stone in someone's pocket. Perhaps the point was just to describe that which is a shame & that of which I am ashamed. To define my ugly feelings by differentiation.

At the same time

Look at what they did to my sister
Last century, last week
-Jamila Woods, *HEAVN*

This right now. Cis women are marching. The Trump Team is preparing \$10.5 Million in budget cuts. A dog is wearing a sign “I march 4 my moms.” Trans Women are marching. The water is boiling. Non-binaries are marching. The apartment smells like fresh dirt because I just watered all the plants. Cis men are probably marching. M. NourbeSe Philips asked for a brown Pussy Hat. Black women are marching. QPOCs are marching. Indigenous people are marching. I can’t figure out where Justin Trudeau is. I refresh a search page every few minutes. He is done with selfies this week, I guess. Raquel Willis is saying, “no one can be an afterthought anymore.” Battery at 84%. Half a million in Washington. There are numbers to take into account here, too. There, too. This is an inventory, too. No one liked my tweet. The tea is steeped. The bag is in the sink. There are 57 300 results for a NoDAPL search; none of the news is from today. Trudeau is meeting with Trump. Their names sound good together. Trum true tra la la la trauma la la la la. Someone is cooking bacon. The Gazette reports an English-language home for the elderly struggles to survive while Jayy Dodd tweets “today i am alive” while it is also reported that there is drama beneath Bishop street on a 42-month project.

If you're like me, continued

*This time, though, I'm having a hard time moving on,
because I don't just see the images as documents of
atrocities. I also see them as aesthetic; and that doesn't
sit easily with the other way of seeing them. Indeed it
feels immoral. It feels wrong.*

-Robert Archambeau, "Aesthetic Interference"

A witness to the distance

Not a witness to atrocity

Oh, lyric of distance

Oh, lyric of removal

Oh, lyric of unease

Oh, lyric of clinical depression

Oh, lyric of unbelievable discomfort

~

When has it ever made sense? To think some sense
could be restored is a fantasy. It is to ignore what
Butler identifies as *the uneven distribution of corporeal
vulnerability*. That thing that prevents sense.

~

The poet circles back on herself.

What to make of this sadness!

What does it do!

~

Again, against

I am weary of an analogy between grief & conflict.
Writing against pain. Writing against loss. Grief as *a war she cannot win*. I am weary of all these wars. Or,
I'd like to understand grief as something not like war.
Not like.

The relationship between opposites, or things set up to be opposing, is a dependency, no? Maybe hope needs despair, or maybe that is too precious a sentiment to let rest in the body.

II

Opo tumon, hayo?¹

opo: yes or what

Late August, early morning, before it's too hot in the house, I get the email. My last aunt on my father's side, sick all summer, maybe with pancreatic cancer—no one would tell anyone exactly—is dead. Well it was morning here, so yes, it was night in Indonesia.

tumon (ton): to be mistaken (about what one has seen); to (be able to) see; to observe; to have seen; to see, watch, witness

Maybe she went to Singapore to see a doctor, I'm not sure. My father had booked a trip to Indonesia already & in his email he wrote, "I was hoping to see her but..."

hayo: (usage: exclamation) for shooing away animals, etc.

It is his ellipsis & later a picture of my uncle at the funeral that stay. He looked like he was about to cry but didn't. Why my father was taking a picture at that moment, I can't imagine / remember. Not thinking is all. But Thian Hwei waves in & out of my consciousness. I forget her over & over. The thing about this is that I am never sure what will be the thing to bring her to mind. Last week it was glitter on the escalator & my body feeling so tired, I let the metal stairs carry me down to the platform as the train doors closed.

¹ "Have you ever seen such a thing?" This is a Javanese saying to express amazed disbelief.

Obit

A bad habit
like walking when I could run

to catch a train
to get me somewhere on time.

Underground at some stations
there is no cell phone signal,

no way to tell anyone anything
without speaking.

The next one.
The next one.

If I saw her again
I might not recognize her.

The interlope–
another bad habit:

every time I try to write poetry
I find I don't have enough

words *and* their
corresponding meanings,

but I just learned
Indonesia is an archipelago

with too many islands
to name or count.

Ibu, Saudara, Isteri

Aunt Hwie, (like *we*)
was, I learned, aunt Hoei (like *oui*)
was bibi Hoei to me
and The Thian Hoei (like *thé, tiens, oui*)

Father, took Joseph in English,
is Sioe An (like *Sue Ann*),
is bapak to me,

& we spelled
her name wrong repeatedly.

Uncle, took Joseph in English too,
is Sioe Siet (like *sue seat*),
is paman to me,

& he didn't correct us all along
until now & Hoei,
in English, Josephine.

As far as I know
'ibu', 'saudara', 'isteri',

are as unknown to me as 'Hoei',
are *mother, sister, wife*,

& Hoei was *oui* was *we*
was

Family History

In my uncle's memoir, as translated from Indonesian by my cousin, a section titled "A Brief History of My Family" begins this way:

*My parents,
especially my father,
seldom told us the history of our family.*

*I remember that father wrote our genealogy
in a book with Chinese characters.
Unfortunately,*

*none of us could read it,
and we don't know what happened
to that important book.*

I suspect it is now lost!

Extended Family

*what nationality
or what kindred and relation
what blood relation*
-Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee*

In childhood & some adulthood I didn't know which aunts & uncles were related to me by blood & which by law.

When I was five, uncle Chung Jean taught me Tai Chi in the driveway of his home in Holland.

One of the first movements is holding your hands in a sphere shape near your chest, followed by stepping forward & pushing your sphere away.

His wife, Aunt Djan, died a couple of years after him. Around then I saw a picture of her & she looked more like my father than I had realized when I was five.

The year before I learned Tai Chi, someone tall enough to reach (my brother, my aunt, my uncle) picked a mango from a tree next to the driveway of Sioe Siet & Thian Hoei's home in Jogja & shared it with me.

The Thian Hoei, from Temanggung

Talk bright to a body
you never knew:

now an archive
a hard drive

aluminum
glass & ceramic

ctrl+f “The Thian Hoei”
in the memoir

she is in it
she is

honey, soy oil
& silkworms

raised in Temanggung
a sister once removed

returned
the roundest trip

a circle
outside of it

a rotating lack
a rotating

morning here
evening there

A distance

*It is not as if an "I" exists independently over here
and then simply loses a "you" over there, especially if
the attachment to "you" is part of what composes who
"I" am.*

-Judith Butler

I am allowed long lapses of remembering. I am allowed distance. A loud distance. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha. The sound of bodies too close together is loud, too. On the way to school one morning on the crowded metro, it occurred to me that I hadn't thought of her since about 7pm two nights before. I forgot or she is too far away or I am too far away, so far away I can't even imagine what she looks like in pictures.

Driveways

On a concrete driveway push a sphere away
from your chest. Memory,

an imagined return to yourself. On a red brick
driveway, a row of trees. Someone tall enough

picks a piece of fruit & holds it in front of you. Red &
green skin, yellow flesh. A sister, once

removed—why not put it that way? The timing must
have been perfect. On a driveway, twist your torso

gently. A mango doesn't need to be washed. You
will not put the skin in your mouth

if someone brings a knife.
The dirt is clean & tended to.

A gate at the end of one driveway.
No cars go in or out.

Outside the house, when your body is realigned,
shoulders square over hips, step forward,

bend your leg & lunge. Grief, a way
to stretch yourself away from yourself.

Kitchen Linguistics

My own oral tradition began in the kitchen
(*caught in*)
never learned how to spell bakwan/batwan
(*but when*)
a corn, carrot, onion fritter
(*a flitter*)
that my father deep fried in a wok
(*walk*)
seasoned before I was even a thought.

~

The kitchen, a linguistic exercise:
sambal, a red chili
olek, a paste
or
sambal, heat &
olek, to grind, or crush
or
sambal, a symbol
and *olek*: oh, look

~

And if we never named
anything we ate
what would we have eaten

satay, batwan/bakwan, gato gato / gado gado, sambal olek
father, look, a skewer of flitter salad & a grinding heat

~

And if we never named
anything we ate
I would have eaten anything.

I would have a language to look for.
A language, a loss.
Father, a symbol crushed into a paste

kept in the fridge
& inheritance: a wok.

Obit

I bet everything old will be new again & I will learn
how to weld joints & fabricate marriages

for health insurance, tax purposes
& citizenship. Maybe if we were more like

beams of metal, maybe
there would be more interest in the heat

that welds us. The hands that bend us.
Sometimes my knees buckle when I run

down to the metro platform to catch a train
I am likely to miss. Back on the platform waiting

obits add up, old news, subtitles roll headlines
full of numbers, a motion, a distraction.

Yesterday, in future tense

I will wake up because the curtain is caught in the fan making a sound that gives me a dream I am on a motorboat traveling at a speed at which no heart at any rate could rest.

I will take the curtain out of the fan. It's old enough that its metal guard has gaps so wide I could get my hand caught in the fan blades so easily so I pause.

I will go back to sleep. & wake up. & sleep. & wake up.

I will get dressed & wear the same clothes as yesterday & forget to change my underwear.

I will draw while I listen to the radio until I've heard the same local news twice.

I will read a story about an anonymous woman dying, her anonymity the story's centre, & I will write a summary & make it about myself. Its title will be *Elegy for the Memory of a Woman* & I will think about how whenever I asked C. what a story or a movie was about she would give me the essence in abstract—"it is like a three dimensional blueness"—and never tell me the plot of the thing.

I will want to leave the house & I will tell the money tree, who I need to prune, & she will say, *so go*.

Before that I will text a friend to say I am too sad to get groceries.

I will say something hyperbolic about finding a closet small enough to sit in. I will be grateful for a friendship free from judgements of hyperbolic expressions of mental health. Or recognition of the hyperbolic as -bolic, so to speak.

She will write back. She will say she is sad, too, but for other reasons.

I will be confused because I do not know the reason why I am sad.

I will want to know what it is to be sad for "other reasons."

Anonymous woman elegy

The story is about the woman who comes into a cafe
three times a week.

It is about how she is a woman
but is not given a name.

It is about how how she died.
About not knowing the woman's name

until she died.
About gathering with strangers to mourn.

It is about the morning the woman died.
The story is about how the woman smiled.

Her teeth.
It is about whether she had a lover,

whether she was loved
whether she deserved love.

Then suddenly the story is about how the narrator feels
bad about the time she told her mother she hated her.

About whether the narrator deserves love.
For a moment, about the woman.

For another, about everyone. But mainly
the story is about the narrator:

how she can make anything
about anyone

about herself seem like
it's about everyone for a moment.

III

Mother, Wife, Sister

I have been rewriting stories & telling them in the passive voice. A story I know called, “Brothers,” in the active voice, goes like this:

A man who works in a bicycle factory in Chicago, a man who is lonely & in love with a girl, this man kills his wife & he doesn’t know why.

In one long scene, men on a rural roadside in a fog talk about that man who killed his wife & those men, they are also lonely & they also don’t know why.

In my version of the story there is a woman who is a wife, a woman who is the mother of two children, a woman who is pregnant. She stays home & does not speak—she, wife, is killed.

The passive voice lets the object (the wife) of the verb (kill) be the subject of the sentence. The agent of the action (the man who works in a bicycle factory or the man who is in love with a young woman), he only surfaces as a prepositional phrase, if at all.

Mother, Wife, Sister

Trained to see ourselves as objects and to be positioned as the Other, estranged to ourselves, we have a story that by definition cannot be self-present to us, a story that, in other words, is not a story, but must become a story.
-Shoshana Felman

What's left of Sherwood Anderson's story "Brothers" if you do a word search for "wife" & take out everything except sentences that include her:

[page 1] ...

[page 2] *A man there has murdered his wife and there seems no reason for the deed.*

[page 3] *His wife in particular was like some strange unlovely growth that had attached itself to his body.*

[page 4] ...

[page 5] *One evening, some six weeks ago, the man who worked as a foreman in the bicycle factory killed his wife and he is now in the courts being tried for murder.*

[page 6] *"Well--there had been a struggle and in the darkness his wife had been killed."*

[page 7] *He spoke of the man who has killed his wife and whose name is being shouted in the pages of the city newspaper that come to our village each morning.*

[page 8] *It may be that the dog like the workman's wife and her unborn child is now dead.*

Mother, Wife, Sister

What unlovely grammar failed you

Into which body did your spirit enter

When his body whirled about & yours fell

What space you took up

Wife is not a controversial statement

In a piece called “Men Explain Lolita to Me,” Rebecca Solnit quotes one man who responded to her identification with the character Lolita this way: he wrote, “you don’t seem to understand the basic truth of art. I wouldn’t care if a novel was about a bunch of women running around castrating men. If it was great writing, I’d want to read it. Probably more than once.” On this Solnit remarks, “of course there is no such body of literature, & if the nice liberal man who made this statement had been assigned book after book full of castration scenes, maybe even celebrations of castration, it might have made an impact on him.” It is easy to understand Solnit’s tone & we know that literature (that art) influences & affects us. This is not a controversial statement. Yet, the man she quotes—who I don’t believe is expressing an exceptional opinion—seems to be negating this idea; or he is at least suggesting that if we understand the *basic truth of art* we will only be affected by an art object in a certain way.

~

His wife was like some strange unlovely growth that had attached itself to his body.

~

The wife, a loneliness the man wished to rid himself of.
The wife, like a dog that might be dead.

Mother, Wife, Sister

I know your story,
a strange unlovely growth
attached to my body.

~

Dear Sherwood, I know
you could not have known that less than 100 years later
some not-wife would take your story,
all 3 569 words
the wrong way.

I know, my reading
is not supported by the text.

I know how it fails.

It's not that I am not lonely.

It's that I know *wife* was the loneliness
the man wished to rid himself of.

Literary Obit

Her body, a canon to launch a thousand investigations.

Her body, a story everyone thinks is a lie.

Her body, the one she lost in a blackout.

Her body, a neon light bent into the shape of a girl.

Her body, a river, to follow to find salt water.

Her body, a theory developed in the 1980's.

Her body, an omission.

Her body, an obit.

Her body, a list.

Her body, a failure to understand basic principles of
literary criticism.

Her body, a triptych with panels divided by white
space.

Her body, an art that can harm.

Fantasy

Look - trees exist.
Rilke, Duino Elegies I

Tell me again the one about Rilke he told you. How he spent two weeks in a monastery, a tourist in not-speaking & upon leaving he met a German girl & how you wondered if he referred to all women as children but didn't ask.

Besides this one was about Rilke. This man telling his Rilke, his silence, his German girl. How they sat in a tree outside the monastery & she read the *Duino Elegies* aloud in German (on the left) while he followed in English (on the right). & Rilke: just a book he had with him, a common language between them.

You saw yourself in a tree reading Rilke to a boy.

Her voice in his voice is yours now. Here, tell me what she sounds like now, how you took her, or was this it, this here, a prop to hold some concept: how *we* sometimes signifies one body & speaks to the trouble of containing many.

Neither of us could agree on a couch, a chair, a tree. No reflection sufficed. There is no where to sit down. We can not imagine any silence lavish enough to sit in so you speak Rilke in her voice in his voice to yourself.

A better obit

Euripides wrote about Hecuba, how she turned into a dog. Her grief for her two children, at the end of the Trojan War, too much to keep her human. A better obit, have you ever seen such a thing?

My interest in elegy is, I find, exceeded by my interest in death.

The stoic

He argued that to live stoically meant that one would most certainly say that the glass is half full because the delight in its—the glass's—fullness was heightened by acknowledgement of the possibility that the glass could be empty. In another example, he said, a stoic would delight—he insisted on the word *delight*—in a sunny day because it is not cloudy, because it is possible that there could have been thunderstorms. Maybe he did not know any stoic gardeners though. Waiting for tomatoes. Every evening, he said, when a parent puts his child to bed, he said, he should allow the thought that the child might die to flicker. One must, he contended, for a moment, entertain the morbid thought. The next morning, the child is still alive (!) & the stoic, because he has allowed the flicker of death to enter his mind takes more delight in his child's life.

When a glass is empty it means there will be a thunderstorm, or maybe someone's child dies in the night, but a stoic does not torture himself because he left an empty glass on the table, because it could have been sunny, because the living go on & so forth. He did not address how a stoic might look upon an empty glass or whether or not he had been to a desert & felt thirsty. When asked if his argument was inconsistent, he said, *I don't think so. No.* Yet, in those instances in which we are thirsty, it is not stoic to cry for water, or delight in what has dried up. I don't think so. No.

No sleep

—After Marina Tsvetayeva, “Insomnia”

*Не думаю, не жалеюсь, не спорю.
Не сплю.*

*I do not think, or argue, or complain.
Or sleep.*

I am as loony as two moons,
the daughter of a tightrope walker
& a woman who dances
& throws axes.

But I don't know when I was born
or when I last woke up
& felt like I was surrounding
something like daylight.

& what gifts will you bring me
if not a garden
& a warm wall to lean against,
& what if
I do not want them.

It's not like I asked for a ship
or a sun or a sea. It's not like
I think, argue
complain, or sleep.

The future, if you want

I will be stoic if you would like me to be so.

I will do something violent & invisible & I will not tell you about it.

I will pick up a clementine & plunge a finger in to it to peel it.

I will wrap an elastic band around my wrist & snap it every so often.

I will expect light.

If you are telling me loss is also a problem belonging to the future I will expect marmalade in the morning on a piece of toast.

I expect the toilet to flush. I expect my feet to be too cold every night. I expect the bed sheets to be tangled. I expect airplane mode & a full glass of water on the bedside table. I expect the kindness of a waning moon.

If you would like me to be so I will be stoic & do nothing that might leave a scar.

I will expect delight in loss if you would like me to. I will hold some coffee grounds in my hand under the tap because a natural body of water & its beach are too far away for me to dig into.

Mother, Wife, Sister

I will shout your name in the pages of the city newspapers that travel to our villages each morning.

Wife, don't blame the girl he was in love with, she did not know she was an unattainable thing, or that his body would whirl about trying to strike out a loneliness in a hallway too dark to see any thing, any weary thing.

Wife, we have different names but we are sisters.

Adaptation

Am I supposed to believe—

when I see this poster
advertising the adaptation of Anna Karenina
from the platform of the metro
every morning, every evening
with Anna's ballerina body bent
like the stem of a leaf
falling or rising
a pose meant
to convey her existential tumult
while a small toy train circles around her feet
her fate so diminished
that even if you haven't indulged
in the seven hundred page tome
even if you never had the thought to do such a thing
or spent a winter attempting your own personal adaptation
her ending is before you
every morning, every evening
on the platform of the metro
you might think it—

that Anna was bigger than her train.

Not new

I stopped writing not because I stopped writing but because there was no originality to my loneliness. Because I was not the only sick woman. Because I was not a good sick woman. Because I was not the only queer & I was not a good queer. Because my longing to leave a life I was barely living was not structured so. So I stopped writing. I made a big deal of it. I made everyone say good bye. I had a party. I called it a wake. I said you will not miss this, hoping someone would. I felt sorry for myself in completely old ways.

Saw in half

Once used for a magic trick
she unfolded herself into an ornate prop box
covered in stars (yellow or white) & darkness:
actually a navy blue.

Under the saw she is
one whole night divided in two
wiggling her fingers & toes for
proof: a body can be OK divided, too.

Wiggling her fingers & toes for
one whole night divided in two.

Under the saw she is
actually a navy blue
covered in stars (yellow or white) & darkness:
she unfolded herself into an ornate prop box
once used for a magic trick.

IV

On wishing to leave a body

If you have wished to leave a body you have thought about lightness. If you have thought about lightness you have thought its opposite. If you have thought its opposite you have wished for more words for its opposite, for more ways to speak it. If you have wished for more ways to speak it, you have thought to leave a body by speaking. If you have left a body by speaking you were outspoken. If you were outspoken you were likely then unspoken. If you have thought to leave a body you have thought to leave a city. If you have left a city was it without speaking? If you have left a city & a body, you have left some way of knowing. You have wished for some way to speak unknowing. If you have wished for some way to unknow, if you have known it, you have thought of returning to a body.

Quiet obit

Once he called you yellow
no lie, at a yellow light

on the way to a baseball game
& you let him run across the street

without you. A swing, a miss.
Thought to walk home

to punish yourself for not
standing up for yourself

but didn't. A swing,
a miss, after a walk

through Chinatown.
You don't even like baseball

but you wanted to go
because the tickets were free

& there are big lights & you like crowds
but grief might strike

you out of them precisely.
At dusk in the stadium

the big lights clunk on,
the buzz of electricity starts

& the grass stained batter,
he swings & walks to first base.

All these things
keeping you quiet.

My body in three movements (first movement)

I read we can understand Shakespeare's use
of the word *nothing* as a reference
to zero where zero means a vulva,
at least in his sonnets. I thought how nice:
one of my body parts, in being nothing,
is something. This something enough to know
I want to drop Shakespeare, stop writing & learn
how to do something useful with my hands.

I thought it out, decided to become
an electrician & my friend told me
I would make beautiful light art: neon
sculptures shaped like no thing in particular.
Or, my body all wired, lit & moving.
But, no, it's not my part to move nothing.

My body in three movements (second movement)

I'll start a queer construction company
to advocate for gay rights & I won't
wish for much else. A lie. I'll try reading
again, I'll try writing in the evenings
when I am tired from wiring light.
& I'll try not to romanticize this
literal electricity. But I'll
probably fail. Because, well, honestly,

I am trying to figure out a way
to want to be in the world. & you know
I expect to be told not to put words
like *honestly* in my poems, not to
start with that shit. So I won't start with it.
I won't end with it honestly either.

My body in three movements (third movement)

I thought about it & the nothing was
not my body. It was not my body:
a tight fourteen lines. It could not be mine.
& it would not be my body drunk with
neon lights either. It's easier if
I understand it is not my body
in particular. Easier if I
accept accepted criticism, if
I admit nothing ever happened to
any part of my body, if I lie,
if I have nothing to lose. Easy if
I'm an absence named nothing.

I write
0 to describe grief & to me it means
I had more than a pen to begin with.

My body in three movements (coda)

You will adapt to the space
every thing takes up. Do you remember
your body? It is a storm you wait for,
leave every door & window open.
& your politics: an attempt to make
some part of your self safe. Where are you
when your phone signal drops,
when even baking soda & vinegar
is not enough to unclog a drain? Don't worry,
one day you will get to go into an electronics store
& trust somebody. Even if
all you have ever learned is to love men & math,
even if the Ragnar Kjartensson exhibit
only moved you literally from room to room,

it's OK. Here:
feel the space between your body & your shadow.

Self-portrait at night

What do you do when you can't sleep?

Count down from five-hundred.

What do you do when you can't sleep?

Think of how we move beneath constellations.

What do you dream about?

The day we talked about war.

What do you dream about?

Fantastic, tall trees I climb & climb.

Do you remember your dreams?

Yes, vividly.

Do you remember your dreams?

Only sometimes.

What are you most afraid of at night?

That I will count down to one & still be awake.

What are you most afraid of at night?

Ghosts.

What else can you tell me?

Tomorrow morning I will tell you everything.

What else can you tell me?

The light of the moon gives the clouds shape & the sky colour.

An exception

I'm not here
to clean a dirty mirror.

Call it superstition but today I wanted
to grind coffee beans with my muscles

instead of blades, & pretend that it was August,
that the snow was exceptional, cooling us off

after a heat wave, that the cold wasn't
acceptable, though sometimes sounds

come together in such a way
to give you faith. The clicking of the heater

each morning, metal expanding
& contracting, not like a lung.

Something welded together.
But there is dust burning,

going to your brain, & why don't we ever
go out on our safe balconies? I noticed

a plant was knocked over for days.
Opo tumon, hayo?

An obit, an opportunity,
a tumour taking over her pancreas,

have you ever seen such a thing?
Maybe the wind knocked over the plant

& you were out of town,
but nothing can survive our winter,

except an evergreen somehow living up
to its name, & that's not what went down

so what was the frail thing
left out there for anyway.

Gathering

if we gather what is left of our
bodies

we have something more to
lose

i f w e g a t h e r o u r
bodies

we have something more to
lose

i f w e g a t h e r o u r
grief

we have something more to
lose

if we gather our bodies we
gather

we have something more to
lose

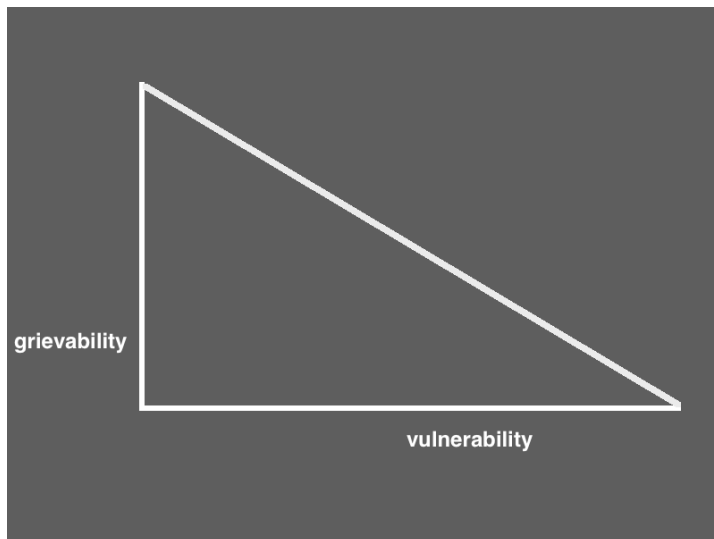
w e h a v e l o s t s o m e
bodies

if we are a tenuous we, we might still
gather

w e m i g h t k n o w w e h a v e
loss

Vulnerability (x) vs. Grievability (y)

The fear of grief
& the impulse to restore loss immediately
is
*“to reinvigorate a fantasy
that the world formerly
was orderly”*



if we stay with grief
*“we might critically
evaluate and oppose
the conditions under which
certain human lives are more
vulnerable
than others
and certain human lives are more
grievable
than others.”*²

² Judith Butler, *Prearious Life*

Three variations on a moving body

One

Your canonical body, Solnit writes,
is a body of literature in which our stories have
been taken away from us, zeroed,
so to speak. Even if it is true: our "we"
is tenuous & every "I" I know
myself to be is a tired metal box,
a freight car, a vessel, a vase, a
vague idea, it was your body
& the outline of your body, the shade of
your body that somehow knew how to move
me around in its dark,
as if it was lit, as if
it was lit by inherent light, as if your light
did not cast a long shadow. Your body,
your vocal chords, you, a yelling middle.

Two

There is more than one way to leave a body
& you've left many behind already. No I know
not you, not you, not your particular you,
your autonomous you, you are lonely, too, is all.
It is all it is. But your body
is not a universe. I do not see a constellation
of stars when I look at your body. I see
an omission, a taking away, I see skin,
I see hair wherever it wants to be. Solway
suggested you give your body & your gaze
a one-hundred year break & maybe I'd miss
some of your particulars but if I were
a braver poet, I'd just tell you—you must know—
I'm tired of your canon body fucking me.
Telling me what loneliness looks like.

& ok, I liked it when Ai Wei Wei filled a room
with rebar. But it was not about his loneliness
it was about negligence. It was an elegy
& sure it was a bit about him, too.
The exhibition, his name the biggest,
but that room was heavy with bodies
& the speakers were literal boxes
of plastic amplifying literal voices
pronouncing the names of the dead.

Three

The loneliness of one man
talking to another man
about a third man is just particular.
Are you ready for your body
to be invisible? Your body is a canon,
like, it's only good for one thing,
& it's obsolete. You don't get to
white wash AND dick wash loneliness.
I'm lonely, too, & my life passes
the Bechdel test. I am the other body,
writing of other othered bodies.
I am othering bodies, too. I am attempting
to make my body legible without your body.
I am trying to make an exit from this universe
in which your body gets to be both
the electrician & the poet.

Your body, a network of stars,
you tell me, it's called a constellation,
you tell me, & you give me aesthetic distance
you tell me, your body offers transcendence
you tell me, it isn't enough to learn
how to wire a light switch.

Story for my ghost³

³ Note: “My ghost” does not refer to my spirit after death. I am very much alive whether I like it or not. My ghost is always near me, & no one else seems to notice. She shows up at bars & sits two tables away, she is in the next stall in bathrooms & appears in the mirror when I wash my hands, she is in my peripheral vision during my commute wearing red. But unlike me she has already lived & died & she is haunting me. A very gentle haunting. It’s not that I like her or dislike her though she seems not to care for me; or maybe that is just her resting face. Maybe this is because we are too similar. Like, fully-white people are always telling us our pale skin has olive tones. Maybe because when we say we’re half-Chinese people say, “I thought so,” as if we were an easy riddle. Maybe because we are both always mistaking each other for someone else. So maybe she is in hell. Like maybe hell for her is having to follow me around for eternity. Except someday I’ll die & then what. If she is not a ghost, I just want to be clear: I did not imagine her. I met her at a book launch several years ago. We were waiting to use the bathroom & she noticed the slight difference in colour between the make-up on my face & the colour of my neck & told me about it when I asked if we knew each other. I’ve since learned how to choose concealer & know you should never try to introduce yourself to your ghost.

Rising

In the light you see how dirty
the kitchen floor really is.

Best to pull up the linoleum
to see what is underneath.

Why not start over & see what rises out of you.
Your breath in February, for instance.

An ugly feeling
not subject to gravity.

Leave your domestic scene
& walk into traffic

because in your absentmindedness
you don't know the light cycle

well
enough.

Javanese Saying

*Opo tumon,
hayo?*

Yes,
What faith

Let go
Faith

Let go
Yes

What
Yes

What
Faith let go

What faith
Let go

Yes
A fate

A faith
without witness

What yes
let go

Something other than a yellow fleshed fruit

All texts are about hiding something only to reveal it.
Some texts do not reveal the thing. Still waiting.
Summary of yesterday: woke up with pain in my lower
abdomen, got up & found a mango in the kitchen. Went
back to bed.