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Independent Scholar

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A language of space and ruin: The elegiac lyric essay and the image of the corpse

Abstract:

The image of the corpse has long occupied a status of taboo in literature, unless presented as beautiful and intact – akin to the Victorian ideal of the ‘exquisite corpse’ – and yet the dead body in its many states of abjection is inextricably entwined with grief and elegy. David Kennedy (2007, p. 110) writes that “Death reduces the subject of an elegy to a finite, readable system. The body can no longer give birth to any new meanings of itself”. The object of the corpse is – as Julia Kristeva (1982) asserts – in opposition to the notion of “I”, it is a subject become object and abject. In my book, *Vessel: The shape of absent bodies*, an elegiac lyric essay, I examine the image of the corpse as I attempt to ‘translate’ my own understanding of how to assimilate these images into mourning over a long period of time. I argue here that the forms of the elegiac lyric essay allow for an aggregation of such images and thus create a space for representation of the image of the corpse. To do so, one must also examine the ethics of transforming the bodies of the dead into bodies of text.

Biographical note:

Dani Netherclift has a PhD in creative writing. Her first book, *Vessel* (2024) was published by Upswell Publishing. Her shortform essays have won, been highly commended or shortlisted in various awards. Her published essays can be found in *Portside Review*, *Antipodes*, *Island*, *Westerly*, *Nitro Creative Matters*, *Cordite*, *Meanjin* and elsewhere.

Keywords:

Elegiac lyric essay, lyric essay, elegy, corpse image, non-human

Introduction

On the second day of 1993, aged 18, I witnessed the drowning deaths of my father and brother in an irrigation channel. Another way to write this is that I saw my father and brother's bodies vanish beneath an opaque surface, and never saw them again. For many years, I couldn't find a way to write about these disappearances; it was not a narrative I could encompass within the structures of traditional storytelling: beginning – middle – end. If I wrote anything, and I began to try almost immediately, it was via snatched vignettes processing memory and thought in a fragmented form in my journals. Although I transmitted a kind of 'complete' story in an oral sense, beginning with police statements and inadequate explanations for my surviving family members in the hours following the deaths, I could no more convey "what happened" in its entirety than I could transpose memory itself onto a page. In the second year of my bachelor's degree in creative writing – 24 years after the drownings – I discovered the form of the lyric essay. In Amy Bonnaffon's "Bodies of text: On the lyric essay" (2016), she proposes that a writer might want to utilise the genre of the lyric essay to convey an idea "about a slippery subject that refuses traditional forms of expression" (2016, np). One reason for Bonnaffon's assertion is that the conventions of the lyric essay open to a writer the possibility of assimilating trauma, grief and memory into a braided narrative composed of fragments, white space, repetition, and utilisation of association and non-linearity, simulating to some extent the ways in which trauma is experienced and recalled. These attributes of the lyric essay made it a perfect genre to contain and piece together my own experience. My first attempt – an account of the drownings braided with technical text by the engineer of the irrigation channel in which the deaths occurred – was called "One fine day" (2019), and within it, I was able for the first time to write about witnessing the drownings. As it turned out, the lyric essay, or what I later came to call the *elegiac* lyric essay, was also a genre that allowed me to approach the subject of the bodies of my father and brother that had disappeared from my sight, that unspeakable, surely unwritable subject that continued to haunt me. This haunted-ness came to the fore when I began to write *Vessel*, my longform elegiac lyric essay about the drownings, as if the images of these unwitnessed bodies were pressing themselves into the foreground, insisting on being acknowledged.

While I was working on *Vessel*, before I realised its subjectivity would focus on meditations on the loss and of transformation of the physical body after death, I wrote a shortform elegiac lyric essay addressing the idea of what my brother's body – recovered three days after his death – might have looked like. This essay, "When alive, my brother bore no resemblance to mermaids", begins with Christopher Columbus's mistaking of manatees for mermaids off the coast of latter-day Haiti, and proceeds to interweave my research into what submerged human bodies look like with a poetic bricolage regarding mermaids. During this research, conducted near the beginning of my creative arts PhD, I had unexpectedly come across photographs of drowned bodies in varying states of decomposition and damage, an experience that was at first shocking and traumatic, but one which led to me writing a poetic description of the "conventions" of a drowned body, much as I might have written about the conventions of a lyric essay. The process of braiding this lyric language alongside a history of mermaid lore allowed me to temper the initial horror I felt upon viewing the forensic photographs into

something consolatory for me as a writer, and presumably this might be also true for a reader of the work. Crucial for the ethics of writing about the image of the corpse was the ability to call myself and the reader back, to recall the vital, loved shape of a body before it took on this new silhouette. Near the end of “When alive, my brother bore no resemblance to mermaids”, I evoke the body and ‘person’ of my living brother, even as I also imagine the shape his dead body might have transformed into –

At first glance, from a distance, I think you could mistake the body of a drowned man for that of a manatee / mermaid. The bulk, the shape and posture might be drawn the same from afar, perhaps through a ship’s spyglass. In the mirage-shimmer of late afternoon sunlight, the skin, its grey pallor, might sheen slightest silver.

It’s possible,

†

though when alive, you would never have mistaken my brother for mermaid or manatee.

At twenty-five years old, his skin was golden, his eyes light green. He loved dogs.
He had the face of a man.

To write ethically about the image of the corpse, there must be this doubling of the image of the living body layered alongside depictions of the dead. This is the obverse of Julia Kristeva’s (2024, p. 3) observation in *Powers of Horror* that the living body is always holding back abjection, until the border between the two is transgressed by death. If, in living, our bodies are pushing back against the “cesspit” of foul liquids, then in death, or at least in writing about death as it has inhabited the body, a writer is always also imagining the past presence, what Helen Garner (2010, p. 218) describes in her essay “At the Morgue” as “the spark” of what made a person “themselves”, the essence of that which renders human (or any) life precious.

In writing *Vessel*, I soon came to realise that the largest number of fragments I had produced in my early drafts fell under the theme of dead bodies, both those of my family members, and meditations on the ways that other writers had written about the image of the corpse. The nature of such aggregated knowledge being pulled into a contingent space of togetherness is part of what makes the lyric essay so fitting as a means of writing about the body, particularly in an elegiac sense, reproducing not only the personal, or biographical, but through a broader, cumulative poetics of the loss of the physical body. Below, I write about some of the examples of ethical writing about the dead body that I came across in my research. Some of these form parts of the citational bricolage enacted in *Vessel*, while others contributed to the thinking-through-writing that takes place as part of the process of writing and constructing a lyric essay.

In the prologue to Michael Cunningham’s novel, *The Hours*, Cunningham first constructs an imagined glimpse into the mind of Virginia Woolf as she enters the River Ouse, her apron pockets filled with smooth river stones. Cunningham’s prose guides the reader through an imagined version of Woolf’s last, conscious underwater moments, but then enacts a surprising turn – the ensuing action is described via and adjacent to Woolf’s drowned body as it comes to

land in the place where it will eventually be recovered. Cunningham places this curious transformation of subjectivity and materiality within a sense of temporal timelessness in which Woolf's corpse – though Cunningham does not describe it explicitly as such – is incorporated into the organic materials of nature that have until now existed outside of Woolf's living body as inert features of landscape, distinct from her status as a human being –

She curls there with one arm folded against her chest and the other afloat over the rise of her hip. Some distance above her is the bright, rippled surface. The sky reflects unsteadily there, white and heavy with clouds, traversed by the black cutout shapes of rooks. (Cunningham, 1999, p. 8.)

In Cunningham's prologue, the corpse has unfurled already into a state transcending the human. David Kennedy writes in *Elegy* (2008, p. 110) that "death reduces the subject of an elegy to a finite, readable system" that can no longer produce any new meaning or determination of its own state. Woolf's corpse as depicted in Cunningham's prose is indeed giving birth to new meanings, though they have passed beyond Woolf's own intellectual conception, now obsolete. It is at this point that, as Kennedy (p. 110) continues, the act of elegising "would seem to be almost a welcoming of the corpse in order to make it into a consoling art object." Such a welcoming and "translation" of the corpse is intrinsic to the ways we write elegiacally about the dead, whose tense is resolutely in the past but who remain present at least inasmuch as they retain a shape, take up space in memory and imagination, and in this sense cannot be ignored.

Within the mosaicked text in *Vessel*, almost immediately after I describe Cunningham's depiction of Woolf's body curled around a bridge piling, I reveal that the drowned body of my brother was found similarly "wedged" beneath a bridge. I remind the reader that despite the finely wrought language of Cunningham's prologue, the salient fact remains that Woolf's body was pulled from the water 19 days after she entered the river. This observation reflects that I have had reason to consider the materiality of dead bodies, especially those submerged in water. To begin with, to even think about such matters, let alone to think to write about them in a lyric sense – to imbue that kind of language into the image of the (possibly abject) corpse – seemed an impossible, if not an offensive task.

I don't know what the bodies of my brother, or my father – whose body was found a few hours after his death – looked like. A funeral director advised us not to view the bodies, or more specifically, not to view the body of my brother. The funeral director told us it was best to remember my brother as he had been, before. Much has been written in the intervening years from a psychological point of view about the importance of viewing dead bodies, so as not to engender what Pauline Boss (1999) has termed ambiguous or unresolved loss. Boss asserts that without viewing remains it can become difficult, if not impossible to move beyond the loss. Boss (p. 5) claims that a mourner who has not been able to view a body can become locked into a sense of "frozen" grief. In my case, having witnessed the drownings, the ways I could remember my brother or father as they "had been" were complicated by frightening, traumatic memories of them in the final moments of their lives. Worse than that though, the funeral director's words conjured horror. Maybe it would have been worse to have viewed the bodies

– I cannot know – but the funeral director’s refusal seeded monstrous images that followed me from the meeting and remained with me for many years.

Vessel is a series of meditations written vis-à-vis the forms of the elegiac lyric essay, addressing the loss of the physical bodies of the dead and how we might write about them and thus be able to “read” or “translate” them in a consoling way. The meandering, organic, non-linear, associative forms of the elegiac lyric essay afforded me a structure in which to write about the image of the corpse in a lyric language that allowed me to move beyond taboo in a way that felt respectful, ethical, and therapeutic. For me, the image of the corpse is imagined, and via this imagined version, I attempt in my essaying to move beyond the “monstrous pictures” that followed me from the room in 1993.

An important component of this transformative work was to consider and curate the ways other writers had written about bodies. It is this aggregation, this gathering and mosaicking of images collaged with my own experience that allowed me to find a way to write about the bodies of the dead. Paul Hetherington and Rachel Robertson (2017, p. 5) discuss in their essay “Both broken and joined: Subjectivity and the lyric essay”, the ways a lyric essay can bring together “divergent material that only ‘belongs’ within its structure for the temporary purposes of that essay”. Within *Vessel*, the forms of the lyric essay permit me to contain and mosaic various depictions of the corpse image from art, literature and history in one place, as motifs. Placed alongside the contemplation of the bodies of my father and brother, these repetitions become elegiac, not merely representations, but laments for the dead.

As referenced earlier, in *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva (2024, pp. 2–3) writes about abjection as a space of border that death transgresses, as “the most sickening of wastes ... The border has become an object”. For Kristeva (p. 3), the corpse provokes revulsion partly because it exposes the foul bodily fluids we spend our lives holding in abeyance, but it is possible via writing and the ways we use language, to move beyond revulsion regarding this transformation or transgression, and into contemplation. Via her elegiac lyric essay, “Autopsy report” for example, Lia Purpura manages to find in the corpse image the opposite of disgust. Purpura (2006, p. 3) begins with a delicate rendering of the drowned bodies of three fishermen she has viewed on a visit to the local morgue: “Their ears sludge-filled. Their legs mud-smeared. Asleep below deck when a freighter hit and the river rose inside their tug. Their lashes white with river silt” and concludes with a consideration of the way that viewing these corpses leaves her afterwards with a renewed conception of the preciousness and precariousness of all living bodies. Joanna Eleftheriou (2017, np) asserts in “Is genre ever new? Theorizing the lyric essay in its historical context” that the lyric essay is useful for representing selves experienced as fragmentary – mysterious or unknown – a quality that Eleftheriou describes regarding Purpura’s “Autopsy report” as something the reader intuitively finds too “strange” (np) to be effectively communicated via other types of writing. Perhaps the quality Eleftheriou mentions is best communicated by this genre because of its hybridisation of the essay and the lyrical. It is possible, via the translatory powers of this kind of writing and subsequently of reading, to discern if not beauty, then, as Eleftheriou puts it, the “majesty” projected via the corpse image, and what it conveys via the fragility and ephemerality of its decomposing form. Within the

parameters of such work, a writer can build a language of beauty scaffolding the corpse, rather than one of fear and revulsion. This type of language and representation is, as I wrote for the blurb on the back of *Vessel*, composed of space and ruin. As briefly referred to earlier in this essay, Helen Garner also visited a morgue, which she writes about it in a short essay called “At the morgue”. Garner (2010, p. 214) writes “a dead body, stripped of clothes, makes sense of itself in no language but its own ... It has presence. And yet it is no longer a person”. The presence that Garner describes perhaps aligns with what Eleftheriou makes of Purpura’s account, as something akin to majesty, but it may be that “majesty” is a placeholder for a quality that language cannot quite parse, or that it can only be expressed via a language, as Garner claims, possessed by the dead, or rather, by nature itself.

Near the beginning of Kate Middleton's book length poem *Ephemeral waters* (2013) about the flow and vicissitudes of the Colorado River, the poem's speaker muses on the fate of a boy who fell into the river and drowned. The body, the speaker says, took 12 days to travel thirty-five miles downstream; she imagines "what remains" (2013, p. 22) and compares journeys of similar time and length in the course of a person's normal days, but observes that the dead arrive "skinless/ smashed beyond reconstruction". For weeks, the poem's speaker cannot stop imagining the damage the river has wrought upon the body of this boy she never knew. She later learns ('*Erratum*' it says in the left margin) the journey she has been imagining as 12 days, was longer still – 16 days. The poem then switches tone and with a margin note of "submerged song" evokes the river itself and the ways it assimilates the drowned body of the boy –

The soft skin loosed from bone
 Unbodied soul wrung
 and silted sanded clean
 anew (Middleton, 2013, pp. 23—24).

The body of the drowned boy is via Middleton's writing articulated into a poem and language of itself, an object form that in moving beyond humanity has transcended horror and, like Cunningham's depiction of Virginia Woolf's body, become organic and intrinsically of nature and natural landscape, a quicksilver feature of the moving river. This transformation, or the meditative imagined observation of it, illustrates what can be achieved via writing – as a traumatically damaged corpse is transposed into a “body of text” – it becomes, via this process of liminality, possible to contemplate. While Cunningham uses prose, and Middleton writes poetry to enact this transformation, layering such fragments into a collection of inter-related and intertextual representations within the elegiac lyric essay enables a reader to consider the meaning of a larger poetics of the corpse image in writing. For me as a writer, to place the bodies of my father and my brother among such writing (and bodies) became possible, and even natural.

Susannah Mintz (2010, p. 10) observes in “Forms of disclosure in the lyrical essay”, that in lyric essays, which are so often written in relation to the body, there is a fragmentary quality in which “details become allusive and elusive at once”. The first ways that my father’s and brother’s bodies were mentioned and therefore interpreted into tentative meaning after their

deaths were also fragmentary, scraps of knowledge that held no place in the hitherto known world; my conceptual understanding of them was as Mintz (10) asserts, both “allusive and elusive” in nature. My father’s body was recovered by police divers five or six hours after the drownings. The following day, we visited the site where he was pulled from the water, and found a pile of blue slate rocks, of the type that lined the bed of the irrigation channel in which he drowned. The arrangement of the rocks looked like a cairn. These were the first fragments of strange knowledge replacing the tangible presence of the living bodies of my father and my brother that had now been “lost”. The next fragment was the news on the following day that one of my uncles had identified my father’s body. My uncle said that there was on my father’s face the trace of a faint smile. There were other, unmoored pieces to add to these – the only accounts we had of the bodies – such as seeing the rope hanging from the bridge downstream from where the drownings had taken place, left in hopes of catching my brother’s errant form, the closest we would get to his presence again, aside from the pair of closed coffins containing their bodies at the funeral. The news on the third day that ‘something’ had been caught in the net on the bridge. How to seam together these bodily fragments of memory into writing? For years, I didn’t know how to try.

The lyric essay enables the paratactic use of visual images to convey meaning without necessarily being contextualised, but in the elegiac lyric essay, this convention can be especially powerful for the writer. For example, the first thing I wrote in the week of the drownings, scrawled into my diary, was part of a line from Sylvia Plath’s (2010, p. 40) poem, “The Moon and the Yew Tree” about the “O-gape of despair”. In *Vessel*, I incorporated this by scanning my father’s wedding ring and reproducing the image along with lineated poetic text offering the ring “in lieu of a body” while comparing it also to Plath’s line,

An O-gape?
Or widened eye? Look,
it is empty now, but once – (2024, p. 47).

This duality of absence and presence speaks also to the nature of my memory of my father’s body on the day he died. There is both his shining body surging up from the wild currents, his arms held aloft, Christ-like, the open (unseeing) eyes and mouth and the foreshadowing memory of his remembered body from an hour or two earlier, leaning against the mantelpiece of my ancestor’s long abandoned house, with a cigarette in one hand and a can of beer in the other, humorously demonstrating the pose he said he would like a taxidermist to preserve his dead body in, should he die. All of this, these otherwise untethered fragments, representations of the living and dead body of my father, the elegiac lyric essay was able to hold and connect.

Some texts I meditated upon in *Vessel* where the transformation of the human body from living presence to the absence of the corpse are witnessed and observed are Ocean Vuong’s *On earth we’re briefly gorgeous* (2020) Marianne Boruch’s *Cadaver, speak* (2010) and Michelle Tom’s *Ten thousand aftershocks* (2021). In my research, though it didn’t make it into my finished work, I was also influenced by Blake Morrison’s *And when did you last see your father?* (1993). In each of the above accounts, the deaths, with one exception, took place at home or in a

domestic setting, and so each of the writers was able to engage with the bodies of the dead in a natural fashion immediately after the death, in some way taking part in caring for or interacting with the body in its transition to the material status of corpse. Vuong (2020, p. 210) references this transition directly in speaking about the aftermath of his grandmother's death, describing the cleaning of the place where the death took place, and of the corpse, "that's what language dictates now: corpse instead of her," and how his family then gather around the body in vigil. Vuong's poetic writing here is frank in its consideration of what takes place in the organic and conceptual process of change from living grandmother to corpse, with both occupying the same space in the room but inhabiting starkly different places in perception, and on the page. Vuong's rendering of his grandmother's corpse into poetic language performs what I have written about earlier, scaffolding beautiful and natural language *around* the image of the corpse. The image of Vuong's grandmother is positioned within *Vessel* beside the fictional cadaver being dissected by medical students in Marianne Boruch's long poem in the book of the same name, *Cadaver, speak*. Boruch's collection was written after the poet took part in a semester-long program where academics were encouraged to engage in research outside their normal field of experience; Boruch undertook a term in an anatomy class, where she and her cohort dissected twelve cadavers over the course of the semester (Higgins, 2014). Boruch's collection, part poetic observation and part prosopopoeia in the tradition of the corpse-poem, collates the uncanny beauty and sense of dignity she gleaned from her prolonged dissection of the cadavers. When utilising the cadaver of a 99-year-old woman as the poem's speaker in the titular poem, "Cadaver, speak", Boruch conveys the organic connection between the living human and the corpse and articulates the cycle of life as both gentle and inexorable. As in Vuong's *On earth we're briefly gorgeous*, the reader decodes the image of the body of the elderly woman depicted in the poems as loved and cared for both in life and after death.

In *Ten thousand aftershocks* (2021), a fragmented, nonlinear memoir weaving her experience of the Christchurch earthquakes with familial trauma, Michelle Tom writes respectively about the deaths, or rather the "after-deaths" of three different family members, Tom's sister, father and brother. I only reference the traumatic death of her brother in *Vessel*, where Tom and her family were advised not to view the body, which was described to her by police – having been found months after the death had taken place – as "in pieces" (2021, p. 176) but the ways Tom writes about the experiences of dealing with or thinking about the respective bodies of her sister and father are also especially moving, and ethically expressed in different ways. Of her father, Tom shares that when it rained the night he was buried, she hoped the rain wouldn't reach the coffin. Tom (p. 151) writes, although she had viewed the body, she still couldn't yet conceive of her father as an object, incapable of feeling or thought. Her experience with the death of her sister, who died of cancer is quite different again, both because Tom was present at the death, where she was able to take her sister's body in her arms immediately afterward, and because she took part in the later preparation of the body for burial. During this period, her sister's partner, encountering the body, remarks on its beauty, an observation further reinforced via Tom's account of the sister's partner kissing the body of her sister all over her face

In Blake Morrison's elegiac memoir *When did you last see your father*, the chapter "Coffin" explores the aftermath of the death of his father. Morrison details his mother's decision to sleep

in the marital bed with the body of her dead husband one last time, though she worries it is macabre to do so. Morrison reassures her she should follow her instinct to spend this final time with the physical body of her husband. Morrison (1993, p. 166) describes how he and his mother sit on the bed late in the night, his mother stroking his father's face and playfully tweaking his nose, "teasing him" about the chill of his body. Morrison writes that he keeps catching the "whiff" (166) of something unpleasant in the room, that he chooses not to examine too deeply. Still, he notes that when his mother leaves momentarily, he lifts the sheet covering his father and "It isn't him in quite the same savoury way now" (167). Morrison's expression here encompasses love and respect for his father in conjunction with recognition of the naturally changing materiality of the body, as something rapidly un-writing and re-writing itself from one state to another. This writing is elegiac, but it acknowledges and incorporates the fully realised notion of Morrison's father's body-as-corpse as an integral part of his mourning via writing. Reading these accounts by Vuong, Tom and Morrison granted me some measure of courage and allowed me to give myself permission to write about the (imagined) bodies of my father and brother in my own book, to textually place them within this company. More than that, though, the process of collecting and weaving these intertextual accounts into a web containing both white space and my own practice of thinking-through-writing enabled me to write and wonder about the bodies of my father and brother in a way that felt not just ethical, and seemly, but reverent, as these other writers had also done. If the traditional elegy forms a refusal to give up the dead, then the elegiac lyric essay might constitute a place to first view and then contain them in all their liminalities.

The elegiac lyric essay, with its use of white space, association and abutting fragments, also invites the reader to participate in meaning making, enabling a reader to transpose their own sense of what it means to them to *read* the image of the corpse. To write and read the corpse image transformed by language into a body of text is itself a consolatory elegiac act. It is also powerful and affecting to *not* write the corpse, to leave the image as a poetics that dwells unwritten in the elegiac lyric essay's white spaces, and for it to be read and transmitted in this way. White space is an inherent feature of the wider genre of the lyric essay, but it can in the elegiac lyric essay perform a specific task, which is to implicitly contain the explicitly traumatised and thus traumatic dead body. Two examples of this I encountered in my research were in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* (2014) and in Karen Green's *Bough Down* (2013), which can both be considered as elegiac lyric essays themselves. Rankine's *Citizen* is broadly concerned with what it is to inhabit a Black body in general in the United States, but as she notes in an article written for *The New York Times Magazine* about the starkly famous image of the body of murdered teen Emmett Till, "We live in a country where Americans assimilate corpses in their daily comings and goings. Dead blacks are a part of normal life here" (2015, np). In *Citizen*, via the use of white spaces, Rankine represents and makes "seen" the multitudes of murdered and abused Black bodies in America, in both the past and the present. As Amy Bonnaffons (2016, np) notes, these white spaces in *Citizen* are also concerned with a "disavowal" of whiteness as an unwritten space of benign ignorance, which is to say, it is a space that is loaded with guilty or malicious knowledge of dead and damaged Black bodies. Via what is unwritten and unrepresented textually, left as implicit in the ostensible blankness

of the page, Rankine makes plain the resonant presence and heft of the dead, allowing the reader to fully absorb the weight of this knowledge.

Karen Green's *Bough down* (2013), with its fragmented, nonlinear forms, white space and collaged images is an elegiac lyric essay about the aftermath of her late husband David Foster Wallace's death. *Bough down* is as one reviewer put it in *The Paris Review*, referring to the swathes of blank space throughout the book, "composed mostly of emptiness" (Sparks, 2013, np). Green begins the book by expressing her uncertainty about where she could possibly begin to parse what it was like to experience coming home and finding the body of her husband hanging from a tree in their yard. Does she begin with the colour black, in the month of June? "Here is fruit for the crows, but that will come later" Green (2013, p. 8) writes, at the conclusion of the initial block of text on the first page, words framed by wide margins on all sides. Later, on page 29, Green evokes the visceral nature of her trauma via revealing via a written fragment the image of the otherwise potently undescribed body of her husband, inscribing her memory of the sound of knee bones possibly breaking when she cut down his body, and how the sound continues to haunt her. Two pages later, Green, in the temporal timelessness of trauma, wonders if she can "feel the floor here" when her husband's body is still outside? As Brenda Miller (2021, p. 101) writes in "The fine art of containment in creative nonfiction", the image of Foster Wallace's body is never revealed, it is obliquely referred to, but is mostly left fragmented, to dwell out of sight in the white spaces of the page, yet always present. Vis-à-vis this writing, Green works through her shock and mourning in a manner aligning with Deborah Tall and John D'Agata's (1997, np) discussion when they coined and described in *Seneca Review* the lyric essay as writing that takes place via an "unchartered course through interlocking webs of idea, circumstance, and language – a pursuit with no foreknown conclusion, an arrival that might still leave the writer questioning". This sense of unfinishedness, or inconclusiveness is a fitting way of writing about traumatic experience and the traumatic image of the corpse as a writer strives to find a way to live with its presence and affective absence. The representations of the image of the corpse as implicit presences in Rankine's and Green's writing respectively illustrate the understated resonance of white space and association in the lyric essay generally but in the elegiac lyric essay especially these connections allow for the unspeakable state of a dead body to be powerfully gestured toward without being described.

There are other examples gathered and mosaicked within *Vessel* that evoke the image of the traumatic or abject corpse without directly limning them, utilising lyric language rather than white space. One of these is from Sarah Moss's 2021 novel *Cold earth*, where one of the protagonists, Ruth, has recently lost her partner in a fire. Moss (2021, p. 106) has her character ponder the unknowable nature of her lover's suffering before his death, and her desire at his funeral to forgo the niceties of a flower covered (closed) coffin, to throw open the casket and reveal, perhaps only to herself, the damage inflicted onto the body of the man she loved. Later, Ruth, who is exhuming Norse remains in Greenland as part of her job as an archaeologist, muses that she would have liked to have buried her partner in an Italian linen suit she had bought as a gift for him in Rome, but that, "his body was no longer the shape of clothes" (2021, p. 112). Moss's writing here represents a nexus of the corpse and the memory of the loved, living body, imbuing the dualism I have earlier referred to, while the ancient remains she is

excavating are also thrown into relief as having once been a living human with a complex and inscrutable life.

Similarly, another intertextual source in *Vessel* relates to the depiction of Norse “bog” bodies discovered in Denmark. The poet Seamus Heaney’s poetic speaker asks in “The Grauballe Man”, from his collection, *North* (1975, p. 36), who could describe such an image as “corpse” when “he” seems so uncannily possessed of presence. Heaney evokes Eleftheriou’s (2016, np) word again, regarding the “majesty” of the corpse, via reminding the reader of the erstwhile humanity, or what the poet calls the “actual weight” (p. 36) of the erstwhile life and circumstances to be considered when viewing and representing a corpse. Heaney reminds the reader that the so-called “bog bodies” are not mere objects of curiosity or tools for learning of the past but are the remaining vessels of what once contained vitality, memory, and experience. The reader is prompted to observe that what Heaney (p. 36) calls “opaque repose” is another word for the quality of absence and presence immanent and mysterious in the corpse. As I observe in *Vessel*, these bodies form distant punctuations of their endings, but via the poems collected in *North*, an afterword of consolation and belated dignity is inscribed into the depictions of them [1].

In a more contemporary thematisation, most of the bodies of those killed by the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were never recovered (Kilgannon, 2021, np). None of the bodies of those who were forced to leap to their deaths from the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre were ever identified (Kilgannon 2021, np). Many elegies have been written about the people who died that day, but in *Vessel*, I chose to thread together two poems about the people who leapt from the towers. These poems are Wisława Szymborska’s “Photograph from September 11” (2005), and Brian Doyle’s “The leap” (2007). Szymborska’s poem arrests the people jumping, immutable in a transfixed moment, where they are still living, their bodies undamaged. The poem concludes with its speaker admitting that these acts, of describing their fall, and not their final fate is all that she or language have the power to grant the people who died in such a way. Doyle’s (2007, pp. 165–166) poem, by contrast, begins with an early description of a “pink mist” created by the terrible force of the impact of the bodies as they landed. But then Doyle, like Szymborska, returns to the image of bodies as they were witnessed in the air prior to the end. Doyle writes in “The leap” of a particular couple, a man and woman who were observed to have jumped with their hands clasped. For Doyle, the pair’s act of union is salvatory toward allaying the horror of the events, simultaneously inscribing grace and “eloquence” into their final actions. For both Szymborska and Doyle, the living body and its aftermath are inextricably connected – each describes the people hurtling through the air as indivisible from their final fates, but the reverse is also true.

Via the organic porousness of the elegiac lyric essay, in *Vessel*, my writing about these two poems is woven into association with an account about the continuing search for the remains of my great uncle, who was killed as a 21-year-old in New Guinea in WWII, and also with the image of my brother’s living body hours before his death, leaping from a bridge into a different part of the irrigation channel where he will drown later in the day. Another story, “What Bobby McIlvaine left behind” (2021), about one of the relatively few bodies from 9/11 that was

identified, didn't make it into this process of elegiac mosaicking, but the reporting about McIlvaine's body by Jennifer Senior in *The Atlantic* informed my ideas of how to ethically frame language around writing explicitly about the corpse. Senior (2021, np) reports reading McIlvaine's autopsy report, which is full of disturbingly graphic detail, which is reproduced in the article; Senior expresses that some details are especially upsetting, such as the bodily elisions listed alongside diagrams and medicalised language, and responses to a checklist where hair and eye colour are described as "none". Senior has access to this report because McIlvaine's parents have provided it to her, after their years of attempting to piece together the narrative of their son's death. The parents of McIlvaine were grateful for the rare clarification offered by an autopsy report, that such a thing was even possible, no matter how graphic and horrifying the knowledge it offered. Such stories – a visceral pathologised lexicon and ordering of death – are important. The same longing to know compelled the composition of my elegiac lyric essay.

The freedom to write of the corpse works to restore a sense of lost humanity via a transformation from body to lyric body of text. Rather than bury the image along with the body, in contemplating it in this way, a writer extends its meaning as an integral component of mourning. Additionally, as David Kennedy asserts in *Elegy* (2007, p. 107), if we consider the image of the corpse as a source of medicine, then to write elegiacally about it might put a writer on the path to healing. Another way to say this is that via these textual transformations, an elegist might finally find themselves able to relinquish the bodies of the dead. The elegiac lyric essay's white space, repetitions, and fragmented nonlinearity draw attention to its subject, gesturing toward the limits as well as the possibilities of language to assimilate the image of the corpse. For me, it afforded a literal space to give shape to traumatic spectres, shapes I was able to "translate" into consolatory words and poetic textual images.

To create these braided fragmentary representations is to find a means by which to look upon the faces of the dead, no matter their state, and thereby to provide a sense of clarity to ambiguous, unresolved mourning. To return for a moment to Eleftheriou's (2016, np) writing on what is most useful in the coining of a genre, it is to demonstrate what it does in a particular way, that other kinds of essays don't. Eleftheriou claims the lyric essay can capture fragmented or elided experience. The elegiac lyric essay takes in the mourner's lament for the dead and braids it with representations of their subject as present and absent, with a body that was once alive and is now dead and works into this fabric materials outside of and other to the elegist's autobiographical experience. To gather motifs of the image of the corpse and mosaic them together on a page is in itself consolatory, because it creates a container for the liminality of a body in its ongoing transformation after death, moving from a vital being with agency to represent and write itself, into an object – a subject that can no longer write itself – but which can be written by others. Using the conventions of the elegiac lyric essay to write and construct *Vessel* allowed me to extricate the images of the bodies of my father and my brother from the haunting impressions that had followed me for over thirty years, to tend to these bodies via writing, and to pull a cloth of white space across their faces.

Notes

[1] In *Field work* (1979) Heaney's next collection after *North*, he again utilises the corpse as an elegiac image of consolation. The speaker in the poem "The strand at Lough Beg" (1979, pp. 17–18) imagines encountering the slain body of Heaney's cousin in a field, covered in blood, and cleaning it with moss and dew, taking the corpse under its arms and laying it flat. Heaney's poem here enacts tending to the dead body via a poetics in the same way that I strive to do with the bodies of my father and brother in *Vessel*.

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