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My objects of affection

Abstract

‘My objects of affection’ is the closing essay in a book called *The Stranger I Become: On Walking, Looking, and Writing* (forthcoming May 25, 2021, Turtle Point Press). This essay blends personal experience, encounters with ‘others’ (in this case not only people but also objects), observations about perception, and both technical and personalised readings of poems that live inside and influence me. In doing so, it serves the goal of gaining both scholarly and personal insight into how, through the deployment of objects, poems come into the world, operate, and inhabit the life of a reader. Together, the essays consider how a mind submerged in poetry and alive in a world of objects, and the slippery language in which objects are invoked, synthesises varieties of experience, including scholarly experience, into producing poetry and thinking deeply about how it works. In particular, the essay examines the ways in which objects, which exist independently in the world but also as sites of meaning and connection in our relationships with the world, can therefore be deployed in poetry both as touchstones and as sites of instability.

What most sets this work apart from ‘braided’ texts is its attempt to eradicate distinctions among elements other essays treat separately, including the objects it references via images, nouns, and pronouns, placing materials together in a conversation that blurs rather than establishes hierarchies and distinctions. Under the category of ‘objects,’ I include the human body and its constituent parts, so confusing distinctions between body and person and among persons, including writer and reader. Thus, the research and artistic claims are identical: that, in an integrated life, assigning personal and poetic meaning to objects, being among others, considering death, and composing or encountering a poem in a way that leads to deep understanding, don’t have to be separate endeavours. This essay participates in my larger project of showing, through enacting, how poems operating as poems illuminate and are illuminated by an individual life.

Biographical Note

Katharine Coles has published seven collections of poems, most recently *Wayward* from Red Hen Press, which will also publish *Ghost Apples* in 2022. Turtle Point Press released her memoir, *Look Both Ways*, in 2018 and will publish her new collection of essays, *The Stranger I Become: On Walking, Looking, and Writing*, in May 2021. Katharine has received awards from the (US) National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment

for the Humanities, the National Science Foundation, and the Guggenheim Foundation. She is a Distinguished Professor in the Department of English at the University of Utah.

Keywords

object poetry – braided texts – the body – mortality – poetic experience

My objects of affection

Death sets a Thing significant

—Emily Dickinson

1.

My father died in my hands, or under them, laid on; also under the hands of my mother and brothers and nieces crowding his bed for his last slow breath. When I first heard his death rattle, three days earlier, I knew what it was from Victorian novels, a sound I will no longer have to conjure for myself out of words on a page.

During the days he took to finish, we moved in and out of his room, going home to sleep and shower, bringing back his favourite carry-out to pair with wines he would have loved if he hadn't been too preoccupied to drink them. We told stories around his bed, not holding him here but weaving him, the man we had once known, back into time.

Then – so suddenly, after the waiting – the seconds between his breaths extended, until finally he stopped labouring and became palpably, by which I mean *to touch*, not a self but a body. It was late February 2020. None of us had any idea what he would save himself – and us – by dying when he did, in a memory care unit that would be closed to visitors within weeks. While his body cooled, we milled around his bedside, unravelling tight-knit awe into loose ends: hunger, boredom, a rising anxiety to move back into our lives—

not yet, and never the same. To be doing anything, we gathered the room's possessions: photos, books, banjo, flannel shirts, mathematical proofs my brother had taped to his door in lieu of the usual decorative wreath or plaque, all of it no longer his.

Our arms laden, at last we left his body, past all that, to be transported to the medical school for its last use.

As the pandemic rolled over us and we shut ourselves in, the English poet Paul Munden, known also for giving others interesting things to do, tagged me on Facebook. For his 'From Our Confinement' invitation, he asked ten friends, one a day for ten days, first to post images of the spaces in which we'd sequestered ourselves, and second to tag one friend a day of our own to do the same.

The question: Where are you?

Which came to mean: With what?

Books on books.

Musical instruments lying silent on shelves or leaning against chairs, waiting to be plucked, blown, tickled.

An antique spindle. Carved and painted masks; artifacts of obscure origin and meaning.

Andy in Winchester, Jen and Shane in Canberra, Alvin in Singapore, Jesse Lee in Uruguay – here in Salt Lake City Lisa posted carnival-bright folk art and Susan whimsical ceramic birds. Around the globe, writers and artists looked over rooms for compositions to set a mood and say – what? – about them, hiding their artful messes and delivering tight shots of corners and halls, doorways moodily lit.

From me, a sea fan, a sculpture of glass and light, a small bronze statue of an ordinary man. My grandfather's ebony elephants with their tiny ivory tusks, acquired a century ago on the other side of the world. Arrayed across the top of my bookcases: my father's mandolin, lute, Spanish bandurria, keeping their songs to themselves. Things I have to look at in place and time, filling me with longing –

– remembering the dead, whose rings I wear on my fingers, their brooches pinning my throat. Recalling me to the world as it still is, out of reach. I cancelled trips to London and Paris, to Sydney, New York, Boston, San Antonio. When will any of us go so far again?

Along with objects, my own photos backgrounded by windows, which, my house being a glass shoebox, I could only use:

—here, at dawn, a snowy canyon emerging into view outside, and, reflected from the inside, a lit-up kitchen. In between, my barely discernible reflection—

—a day later: my treadmill in its welter of cords, beyond which the same canyon greens suddenly out of snow into spring—

—all day, my rooms filling with clouds and birds, deer, the occasional fox—

—becoming an inner life.

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away

What portion of me be

Assignable – and then it was

There interposed a fly –

With Blue – Uncertain – Stumbling Buzz

Between the light – and me – (Archive, 2020, 235826)

Dickinson's 'I heard a Fly buzz' opens with a rattle, vibrating the whole sensory self. Inside 'the Room' and outside, it makes itself felt as presence 'Between the Heaves of Storm,' the threshold from which the 'I' of the poem speaks.

Not the threshold but the windowsill, where at poem's end the fly will simultaneously emerge into visibility and erase vision, along with hearing, all sense. In the poem's extended metaphor, Dickinson uses this confusion of sense, and its obliteration, to think through the passage the body undertakes to become, like all things, subject to possession.

'I willed my keepsakes,' she says, 'Signed away/What portion of me be/...' Suspended in the line break between 'be' and 'Assignable,' she elides the question of what 'Assignable' objects may be left by will, suggesting instead that she is 'sign[ing] away' what of *her* will remain here after death. Yet the body, as a rule, occupies a different category than 'Keepsakes' – except maybe in its non-perishable bits, a lock of hair braided or the bleached finger bone of a saint; or unless, like my father, this speaker donates herself to science, to be parsed and weighed, studied and quizzed. As the body is at last dismantled and returned, its speaker's earthly 'Keepsakes,' in their passage from her possession to the possession of others, in time become not only all that can be kept of her, but at last all there is, the only 'portion of [her]' that anymore 'me be.'

After that line break on 'be,' which places us into paradox, the poem falters in its strict rhythm, first forcing by means of the insistent iamb a hard stress from the last syllable of 'Assignable,' which in ordinary speech wants to be half-swallowed. Here, it can't be, since it's followed by the marked hesitation of '– and,' which cannot bear weight so at once forces the stress backward to 'ble' and shifts us emphatically along to the 'then' that follows.

Thus, the act of assignment itself brings on the poem's anticipated end and closes its temporal circle: 'And *then* it was' (my italics) – the precise moment in which presence becomes past – 'There interposed a fly.' In reintroducing from the beginning the 'Blue – Uncertain – Stumbling Buzz' it seems also to enact, the line marks the final turn of the poem, where hearing gives way to sight. Between them, the windows and the eyes create the space in which the fly's 'interpos[ition]' occurs. If before the fly existed sonically both inside and outside the body, now it comes visually 'Between the light and *me*,' 'me' being the self as a whole and not merely its eyes, which the poem is careful not to name here; where the poem does name the eyes, back at the beginning of stanza two, they appear not as instruments of the speaker's vision, but as outlets 'wrung dry' of the grief of others.

If a window can't 'fail' in the way a body can, the fly interferes with the light at the whole site of presence. In its final line, 'I could not see to see,' the poem, through repetition, substitutes understanding for physical vision, distinguishing them in the moment of their mutual failure. I take this action of vision and its failure literally, *physiologically*. As the eye communicates back into the brain, so the brain reaches itself outward into the eyes, the connection between the two intimate and material. We look not at or through but *with* our visual apparatus, however unpalpable, even speculative, our nervous systems make our looking – by which I mean that unless something goes wrong, the eyes in their seeing feel like nothing, enabling presence without our noticing them. But acting as the transparent boundary between interior self and the world out there, they are anything but nothing.

As Dickinson asks elsewhere, or everywhere, 'Go we anywhere/Creation after this?' (Archive, 2020, 239594).

The magic of the artifact, the thing once touched by, once made by, even once part of the body of the other. You can see this poem *in her own hand*, as we say, by which I mean online, where I often visit it. The first time my Googling landed me on the Emily Dickinson Archive, a joint project of various holders of the original manuscripts, and called up the handwritten version of ‘Long years | apart – can | make no | breach’ (Archive, 2020, 12172350), my body fizzed. Likewise when I opened *The Gorgeous Nothings*, the coffee-table-sized edition of Dickinson’s envelope poems in, yes, gorgeous facsimile. My students, when they encounter the poems, talk about how the handwriting, enacting a mind not regularised in a print medium that couldn’t accommodate them, at once frustrates them and gives them a palpable sense of freedom. Still, none of this compares to being present with the actual pieces of paper, on which Dickinson’s own hand pencilled words still in motion on pages I once leaned over a glass case to decipher.

She was writing for the future. The pencils lived in her pockets, nestled with scraps of paper she would write on, had written on, would reach her hand in to find. She wore those fragments. They had walked through the day with her, secreted in her famous, misunderstood white dress.

2.

My California friend, whom I believe I see quite clearly in my mind in both her younger and her fairly recent selves, claims to have the capacity neither to store visual memories nor to make images in her mind. Of course, when I finally see her again, though she will not look exactly as I picture her, I will know her. And I must ask her: how does she recognise me every year (but not this terrible year, or next) across a huge conference centre or on a crowded street, if she doesn’t keep an image in her mind?

Technically, you might say she has no capacity to *imagine*, but my friend writes vivid and musical narrative prose in which characters and objects come alive in their surroundings, which also come alive. I remember powerfully across thirty years a character in one of her short stories emerging into an unexpected sexual flush, can still see the blushing, almost overripe loosening of her body, that object, as desire hardened. From an essay my friend sent me just this spring, I carry an image of a river, an inner tube, an adolescent girl riding downstream past a man on shore, who, as she drifts by, manhandles his own eye-riveting thing, willing us all to see it. People, objects, landscape: whatever my friend did or did not visualise in her own head as she wrote – nothing, she claims – she doesn’t *need* to see them. She has only to name them to lock me into a narrative stream.

In a fit of abstraction, Anne Carson says, ‘When the mind reaches out to know, the space of desire opens and a necessary fiction transpires’ (Carson, 1998, p. 171).

Of an apple left high in an otherwise bare tree in Longus’s novel *Daphnis and Chloe*, she writes, ‘The apple flies while standing still’ (Carson, 1998, p. 89).

Flies *away*, I think, seeing that apple, apple-red in my mind’s eye, though this is not what Carson says. The actual distance between me and the apple remains the same, but it seems to increase with desire.

Carson's translation of Sappho's fragment 105A goes,

as the sweetapple reddens on the high branch

high on the highest branch and the applepickers forgot—

no, not forgot; were unable to reach. (Carson, 2013, p. 215)

The apple I see remains unfixed and mutable, personal and idiosyncratic. Different from all others, maybe only mine escapes.

More poets than we may think are sparing in their imagery, or at least its elaboration – Dickinson, too, for whom “‘Hope’ is *the thing* with feathers’ (Archive, 2020, 12169613, my emphasis). I don’t get to see the world lying outside Dickinson’s failing windows, whether there might be an apple tree with a single unpicked apple, or on how high a branch it flies, overtaking what feathered thing. Nor does she show me the keepsakes inhabiting her poem’s room’s interior, though I may bring to mind an image of Dickinson’s actual room, where her pockets hang in Amherst for pilgrims to visit. Even her fly brings not its visible self but all-encompassing darkness, the field of vision narrowing inside the room and the singular body, while ‘the space of desire’ and the ‘necessary fiction’ that arises from it, are foreclosed.

Not that Dickinson eschews imagery when she needs it – think of that ‘narrow fellow,’ whose ‘zero at the bone’ effect depends entirely on our seeing, riveted, ‘the Grass divid[ing] as with a Comb’ (Archive, 2020, 236315) – but any constructed presence, when it’s there, relies on the rhetoric and requirements of the poem.

In an expediency of naming, for example, ‘To make a prairie,’ to which I can’t help returning, composes its brief self, a kind of instruction manual, like this:

To make a prairie it takes

A clover and one bee, –

One clover and a bee,

And revery.

The revery alone will do

If bees are few. (Todd, 1896, p. 119)

Of this, an imagination (the poem’s deceptively colloquial ‘it,’ inhabited perhaps by a god but certainly by the poet, who is the real power here) begins by creating, in mind, the first line’s entire prairie, then (Focusing down? Scaling back? Reversing time?) removes that prairie, leaving merely ‘a clover and one bee,’ one of each, no more. How careful she is with her articles, and how playful. The reversal – ‘one clover and a bee’ – becomes, subtly, not repetition but substitution, which asks us to linger on difference in sameness. As with metaphor, the substitution of one thing for another not-quite-the-same thing opens up space in the poem, refusing to move the reader forward, instead sending her back, then forth, then back yet again, to consider the poem’s distinctions and what they might mean.

There's not a single descriptor in the poem. If you see a clover and bee, you've let their names drag pictures with them (or not, in the case of my friend), which your own visual cortex supplies, lighting up exactly as if the objects have presented themselves before your eyes. What the poem itself offers is not imagery but a conceptual act, a movement of the mind.

Meanwhile, the distance between 'one clover and a bee' on the one hand, and 'a prairie' on the other, blows open Carson's 'space of desire' for me to inhabit, and you, dizzy and in motion, as does the distance between the reaching hand and the apple, which we fill with our selves. The poem becomes 'the action of reaching out toward a meaning not yet known,' and not to be known (Carson, 1998, p. 166).

'Like a face crossing a mirror at the back of the room, Eros moves,' Carson tells us. 'You reach. Eros is gone' (Carson, 1998, p. 166).

Knowledge, like meaning, is hardly the point. If the poem means to tell me how 'to make a prairie,' the instructions couldn't be simpler. But Dickinson, a serious botanist, would have known they could never succeed, whether to make *your* prairie you're counting on propagation through seed, in which case you need at least two clovers, or through root spread, in which case the bee is superfluous.

Either way, 'it takes' near enough forever.

When I think of my father these days, I almost always picture him outside, often eating – sitting on a restaurant patio or the long veranda of my now-sold childhood home, or high in the Wind River range, perched on a rock beside a glacier-fed lake with a chunk of hard salami in one hand and a pocketknife in the other. In a minute, he will use the tip of the knife to wrinkle a smoked oyster from among its fellows, bedded in their rectangular tin; before long, he will toss me an orange, and I will fail to catch it, since as usual I'll be paying attention not to the fruit that flies toward me but to the one that escapes. I can see all of this: light glinting on the water, the wind in the trees, a cloud shredding its weather over high peaks. My father, I am sure, can see trout glimmering just under the lake's surface; equations hum in his head the way sentences hum in mine, different grammars rearranging the world's furniture, making order or its opposite. I smell the spices in the salami, the oyster's musky oil, the clean sharp orange peel when I break it. I can smell the rock, knowing as I do that these are not his memories, or even finally mine, but only words.

The plaid flannel shirt I took from his last closet is one of many I gave him – a 'really good shirt,' he called it. Over many washings, even as it softened, it kept its bright ground, the colour of an apple flying not on a branch but in the mind's eye. Far too big for me (he was over six foot; I'm just over five), the shirt is good for throwing on over a t-shirt on a cold night. Though of course I've washed it, I imagine I still smell him in its weave.

Maybe he imagined one of his sons would take it, if he imagined anything in his last diminishing year. We may ‘assign’ our ‘portions’ as we wish; we can’t control where they go. I’ve gazed online, never in person, at a small auburn curl from Emily Dickinson’s twenty-three-year-old head, now owned by Amherst College, which received it from the descendants of her girlhood friend Emily Fowler (later Ford). Dickinson’s letter said, ‘I shall never give you anything again that will be half so full of sunshine as this wee lock of hair, but I wish no hue more sombre might ever fall to you’ (Ford, 1853, #99).

According to the journalist Steven Slosberg, two other locks listed as Dickinson’s were left in the estate of the poet J.D. McClatchy (Provenance, 2019). They are of different colours, only one the vibrant auburn she was known for in her youth, but whose hair stays the same? Together, they sold at auction for \$800, despite the uncertainties of their provenance, or because of them. The locks came to McClatchy with other items on the death of his friend James Merrill. Nobody is saying for sure how Merrill got them, but when Slosberg sent an inquiry to Langdon Hammer, author of the 2015 biography, *James Merrill: Life and Art*, Hammer wrote back with ‘a story about JM breaking into the Dickinson house with some friends and making off with some goods. He said he took, if memory serves, a sherry glass – in honour of her eyes (which she described as sherry-coloured).’ Though Hammer originally assumed that ‘this was an apocryphal story,’ he notes that the prominent Dickinson scholar Ralph Franklin thought the burglary may actually have occurred, perhaps at Dickinson’s brother-in-law’s house, since Merrill’s collection held a collection of Dickinson’s poems ‘inscribed to her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert,’ which McClatchy later donated to the Beinecke Library.

Sherry glasses. Sherry-coloured eyes. A book inscribed – by whom, since Dickinson herself was dead before any collection of her poems came out? – to the woman she may have loved above all others, to whom she wrote frequent passionate letters, even while Susan lived next door. Light as apples, her letters, or bees, ornamented with her barely legible hand; magic, the hand-stitched fascicles; more magic still, the poems she wrote on the backs of envelopes: her script curving around flaps and addresses, the occasional whimsy of an additional fragment pinned on.

3.

Since the virus came, except when I’m running or performing essential errands, I find myself inside my glass box, spinning with my things through space. ‘Now is a gift of the gods and an access into reality,’ Carson tells us (1998, p. 153), though just at the moment, in our endless indoor wheel-spinning out of the present, I find it difficult to believe her.

To Dickinson, bees are never superfluous. Nothing is, especially not *now*. She never meant me ‘to make a prairie,’ least of all in our lifetimes.

Maybe when she wrote she imagined someone like my father, who, when I was a child, planted trees that now tower over the neighbourhood. Even when those trees had grown to the eaves, he decided the beech was a little too close to the house, so grabbed his shovel and drove his truck onto the lawn, full of purpose and joy – not to remove the tree, but to move it a few feet over – drawing the neighbours out to watch and comment.

Dickinson may have meant him, or me, or someone else in this future she either could or couldn’t have imagined, to make or read a poem. Likely, she didn’t care what any of us might do.

Except that when her sister threw open the trunk, looking for Emily's letters to burn as instructed, she found, to her astonishment, almost 2000 poems. Which, Emily not having mentioned them in her instructions, Lavinia had the sense not to burn.

Like the poet, a bee works and works again over her blossom, gathering and stuffing her little thigh-pouches until it seems impossible she might still fly. The blossom keeps yielding, and between bee and flower I am entirely carried away, flying at once like an apple leaving orbit and like a bee loaded down. The poem has found and instructed me, as it tells me in its last turn, not in agri- or apiculture but in 'revery,' in the making of a dream of clover over which a bee in her singular resonant multitude browses, as do I. Conjured objects, and revered – clover, apple, bee – release me into the dreaming field of poetry, and this is the poem's instruction.

When I first read 'To make a prairie,' I assumed the clover flower was pinkish white, like the clover I see in my yard. But prairie clover is gorgeously purple, something my father would have known. The poem doesn't care either way. You don't have to *see* any of it. Rather, Dickinson depends on your apprehending.

The objects are everything. And, like so many things, also beside the point.

Dickinson eludes us because she means to.

'Neither for me honey nor the honey bee,' says Carson's Sappho (2013, p. 146). And yet, between them, Sappho and Carson, like Dickinson, give us both.

Aside from his lutes and red flannel shirt, the objects that came to me from my father came before he died, though after he had begun his long passing away. When he went into care, my mother sold the family home and its veranda, its high ceilings and commensurately long staircases, including the wooden one, polished to a treacherous shine and bottoming out at a hard marble floor. What she didn't take with her to her new condo she offered to her children. What we didn't want, and a few things we did, she gave away or sold, more or less ruthlessly.

I had no use for my father's hunting rifles or place for the excellent canoe my mother bought him one birthday. His little bits of jewellery and cashmere sweaters, which like his best wines he saved for festive occasions, went to my brothers, the cellar to my mother, who shares it with her children a few bottles at a time.

In truth, my father never collected ornaments and baubles, though I happily wear my great-grandmother's passed-down jewels with jeans and flannel, as if they are meant for real life. He, too, liked things he could use: bungee cords, his instruments, good knives, cameras and binoculars; trucks with the power to uproot mature trees; the Mojo Pizza ballcap my older brother brought him from Phoenix, or the one I carried back from Palmer Station in Antarctica, which let him bear an applique of a frozen continent like a hood ornament on his forehead. A fan of magpies, a Depression baby, my father repurposed yogurt containers and collected used twist-ties, tinfoil re-smoothed and folded away in a drawer. He might say of a paper sack that looked binnable but whose structural integrity he'd assessed at a touch, 'That's a really good bag.' When his children made fun of him, he would say, wearing his serious face over his satirical one, 'In the next war, you'll come begging for rubber bands.'

‘If you really get down to the disaster, the slightest eloquence becomes unbearable,’ Beckett says. The next war, or something like it, has arrived, and keeps arriving. His rubber bands are gone.

After he died, of course, people told me things about him I wished I’d always known. He had taught my mother to see animals that were secreted, invisible to others, in their environments: fawns left safely nestled among leaves (my father could smell them, she said); leaf-shaped birds sheltering in the trees. He once sat in a winter clearing and hushed an old friend, the friend told me, so they could hear snowflakes crackling. I have their stories and my own that, like some objects, keep coming to mind. I mean ‘come’ in the sense of rise, into clarity, into semblance and resonance.

Carson says, ‘In any act of thinking the mind must reach across this space between known and unknown, linking one to the other but also keeping visible their difference’ (Carson, 1998, p. 171).

Where go we? I wonder now if I should have taken a lock of hair, some clippings from his fingernails. It would have been unlike me a year ago, but now, so many others having slipped alone into memory, I might become a person who would wear a piece of her dead father in a locket.

‘The tie between us is very fine,’ Dickinson wrote to Susan Gilbert, ‘but a hair never dissolves’ (Gilbert, 1896, #HB148b).

At night, the bright outside fades from my rooms. My house, its ghostly interior reflected on itself again and again, overflows its objects.

The body I hardly notice any more glimmers faintly by.

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