

On Cenotaphs and Friendship: Notes Toward Quantum Elegy

May, mid-morning, Mount Auburn Cemetery.
Unnoticed, a funeral cortege rumbles past
a row of kindergarteners crouched beside a pond,
transfixed by bobbing mallards and basking box turtles.

A little on the nose, E would say, and grin,
E who has been dead for fifteen years,
E who is not—whose body is not buried—here,
in this vast archive of the departed,
this garden and arboretum for the living,
where already the ephemeral carpets of scilla
under the beeches have vanished,
and the beeches themselves are under threat—
though, as I roam toward another poet's grave,
missing E, missing other kindred spirits,
each step begins to feel like a conjuring.
I wish the mowers would quiet.

This spring, three of my friends are living
with terminal illness. Two know they are dying,
have shared their knowing with others, with me;
I'm not aware the other friend is so gravely ill,
though she may suspect it; I cannot be sure, now,
the now of this writing.

In the other now,
this morning in May, as I walk among the dead
contemplating the poems I might offer
to dying friends many miles away
to lighten for a moment their suffering
without making my grief their burden,
a glance toward a curious structure alters
my trajectory. I veer closer. Tangled ivy grows
between a short column of petrified wood
and a stone plaque, which identifies the pairing
as a memorial for an astronomer.

This memorial, I'll later learn, is a cenotaph.

From the Greek, *κενο*, empty, + *τάφιον*, tomb,
cenotaph usually refers to a monument for the dead
whose remains are known to rest elsewhere,
as the remains of Percival Lowell, the astronomer,

are buried in an Arizona mausoleum.
Cenotaphs are not always placed in a cemetery.
You may have paused to read roadside memorials
for accident victims; Ancient Romans paused
before cenotaphs on the Appian Way.

Other cenotaphs memorialize the dead
whose remains have not yet or cannot ever be found:
trailside cairns raised for fallen hikers;
on Mount Auburn's Pyrola Path, the monument
for Margaret Fuller, transcendentalist shipwrecked
achingly close to shore, presumed drowned;
in New Bedford, marble plaques still affixed
to the walls of the Whalemens's Chapel,
tributes to lost sailors that Melville noted from his pew.

Some cenotaphs exist only in the abstract,
or as designs too impractical to build, like
Étienne-Louis Boullé's marvelous plans
for a massive, spherical *Cénotaphe de Newton*.

And I'd argue—though what body would adjudicate?—
there are once and future tombs
we might term cenotaphs by dint of circumstance.

Cleopatra's treasured mausoleum, before the asp;
my grandfather's practical granite slab
in Buffalo standing at the ready:
some tombs are temporary cenotaphs
while their intended occupants remain among the living.

And tombs once occupied may be emptied,
whether by ordinary time's dissolution;
or by desecration and excavation at human hands;
or by divine intervention, if you are so disposed:
Take ye away the stone. Woman, why weepest thou?

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Midsummer. In the living room, weeping, I watch
a friend's livestreamed funeral service.

Too soon for elegy, too late to write to her,
as I'll write to you: My friend, I wish

you were with me today, in the cemetery,
resting on a bench in the circular garden

watching a mouse scout the undergrowth
of vervain, beargrass, coneflowers, hydrangeas—

for what, I don't know. The air's so weighted
with perfume and heat, it baffles sense.

As if through honeyed wine, cabbage moths slosh
along their nectar rounds; dragonflies fizz

breeze to breeze, away; the fountain's murmur
seems composed of sprightly voices—no dream:

two friends, unseen. One helps the other run her lines.
You'd know the play.

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I wonder where it's gone—if it's gone—the distress
Melville's Ishmael describes when observing mourners
at the cenotaphs in Seamen's Bethel:

“Oh! ye whose dead lie buried beneath the green grass;
who standing among flowers can say—here, *here* lies my beloved;
ye know not the desolation that broods in bosoms like these.
What bitter blanks in those black-bordered marbles which cover no ashes!”

I suppose, when we're accustomed to living far from our friends
or to count friends dear we've never touched, only met through screens,
that to be divided from the dying and the dead seems natural.

And yet: the nursing home, the ICU, the Zoom funeral of it all—
do you feel, too, a strange sense that we've misplaced the body?

Please join us for a celebration of life. Burial will be private.

“It is a matter of instinct, not of reasoning,” said Joseph Story
during his address at Mount Auburn's consecration,
that “We seek again to have our home there with our friends,
and to be blest by a communion with them.”

By “there” he means the burial ground.

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*Lost at sea. Buried at sea. Buried where he fell.
Lost at sea on S. S. Titanic. Killed in action.
Accidentally drowned. Lost at sea. Lost at sea.*

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Now, when I encounter a cenotaph, I'm reminded of
a dear friend whose beliefs, as I understand them,
forbid the living from setting foot on graves.
'This friend cared for me in the wake of E's death,
when I lived far from my family,
when I was difficult to care for,
when I indulged every self-destructive impulse
unfocused rage and desperate sorrow suggested.

When E died, young and out of order, I had no idea I lived
across the river from Mount Auburn,
but had I known, I wouldn't have cared
about its placid beauty and polyphonous histories.

In those months, I avoided cemeteries,
in part because I could not bear the reminder
of E's body alone under the earth,
five hundred miles away; and in part because,
deep in the contemplation of how I might end my own life,
I did not wish to imagine my beloveds
congregated in a cemetery like those I then knew,
either neat and sterile subdivisions, or
overcrowded cacophonies wobbling toward dereliction.

'That I survived acute grief is a testament to my friends' care.

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October. Late roses, low skies. Warm.
Autumn's looks, without the bite.
I've never seen the cemetery so crowded
with the living. Birders, tour groups,
nuzzling couples, families with strollers,

Goth teens—how tenderly you'd regard them!—
decked out in all their finery: satin coats billowing,
buttons and brooches gleaming, epaulettes a-shiver
as they descend the hill where Washington Tower
—another cenotaph—presides over Mount Auburn.

You'd say I should invite them along
to the chapel, the one with attached crematorium,
where today there's a death awareness meditation.

The speaker's mild voice flows over and under
the reverberations of argent and sable,

the cellist-composer's bespoke instrument.
The meditators discipline their breath. Absorb the sound.

By nature averse to stillness, I concentrate on making
my body soundless and unseen. Corpselike.

I wonder which of my friends are still among the living
as the meditation conjures nothingness,
the end of all life on Earth. A vessel, carefully wrought,
to distill diffuse and protean grief,
a vessel from which my particular griefs keep escaping.

E died suddenly. This is not a euphemism.
Beyond rotten chance, there was no-one, nothing
to blame for his death: no suicide, no gun, no drug, no war,
no epidemic, no addiction, no disaster, no accident.
Nothing to rage against, no cause to rally around,
no lesson to be learned

until my grief turned chronic
and I began to comprehend what unearned fortune was:
to live with death as an errant, unwelcome caller,
not companion. To be spared so much, for so long.

(You and I both know this kind of luck won't hold.
We know time is marshalling my losses.
And—forgive me—yours, too.)

It was not long after I'd recovered my equilibrium that I came to know Mount Auburn. At first, I needed a free and quiet place to show my son ordinary beauty: flowers, ducks, trees.

But soon my family, my friends in all seasons
found themselves towed along its paths,
mildly lost among its mazy roads,
goaded into sharing my astonishments.

Around this time—between the spring
we lifted our son into the magnolia branches
so he could feel their Cretaceous kisses on his cheeks,
and the spring he found the letters of his name carved in stone

—around this time, a phrase began following me and still does, like one of those ravens

that remembers human faces:

Elegies for friends not yet dead.

I was mortified, of course, ashamed
to think something awful in me *wanted*
to contemplate my friends' deaths,
when they deserved only odes, and far better odes
than the toothless ones I'd drafted.

Elegies for friends not yet dead.

I don't how I missed it, a decade later,
perched on the astronomer's cenotaph,
waiting.

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November. Feeling both foolish and solemn,
I've had another conference with a certain gigantic oak.
I wish you were here—you know what I mean— if only
for the trees: the parasol beech with dinosaur-skin bark,
willows whose supple twigs glow red in winter,
dawn redwoods shedding their green, just now,
as if confused by their own coniferousness.

In 1846, Emily Dickinson writes to a friend:

“Have you ever been to Mount Auburn?
If not you can form but slight conception –
of the ‘City of the dead.’ It seems as if
Nature had formed the spot with a distinct idea
in view of its being a resting place for her children,
where wearied & disappointed they might stretch themselves
beneath the spreading cypress & close their eyes
‘calmly as to a night’s repose or flowers at set of sun.’”

The accession date on the huge oak's tag:
1831, the year the cemetery was founded.
Two hundred years ago, the tree had grown
large enough to be recorded. Two centuries!
That we can visit this living creature
whose treeish senses perceived Emily Dickinson
and her shadow, passing—the sheer weird delight
renders me a little giddy. If I could tell you
how many photos I took of this tree, how many admiring
pats I gave its trunk before I realized this—my friend,
I think you'd laugh, if you're feeling well enough today to laugh.

And I wish I could read the poem E would make of it,
E who tomorrow would have turned 41.

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Given:

You too have woken
from a dream in which

your friend is $\frac{\text{dead}}{\text{alive}}$.

You can place yourself
in a dark room.

You cannot place yourself
in time.

Prove:

Your dream $\frac{\text{mirrors}}{\text{does not mirror}}$ the waking world.

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As an equation with more than one solution
(if $x^2 = 16$, it is true that $x = 4$,
and simultaneously true that $x = -4$)

or as a ghost inside a closed box,
either asleep or awake, impossible to tell
unless the box is opened, the ghost observed:

so, physicists tell us, we might think of a particle-wave
in a quantum superposition of states.

E died in the night.
Five hundred miles away, I slept.

Until the call came hours later, I lived
in the mistaken belief that he was alive.

Since that call, unless I can directly perceive them,
all my ostensibly living beloveds exist—
relative to me—in quantum superposition.

They are both alive and dead.

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A cenotaph is a place where absence is present.

A cenotaph is a place to be present with absence.

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Winter.

Elegy is a place mourners come to name and grieve the dead.
With the speaker, the reader commemorates the elegy's subject
as the bereaved visit the tomb and read the epitaph.

But for anticipatory grief—

grief for those who are ill unto death,
grief for those who by dint of age or circumstance
 seem likely to predecease us,
grief for those who seem no nearer to death than ourselves
 but who could at any instant | *this one* | die,

to what memorial, to what manner of poem may we turn?

I want to suggest that we may channel our anticipatory grief
into a form of elegy with negative capability,
a form of elegy that does not require us to know
the condition of its subject's existence,
a form of elegy that may be shared with its subject,
a form that expands the elegy's temporal territory
as cenotaphs extend the mourning field.

Quantum elegy.

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Like cenotaphs, quantum elegies
may exist in multiple iterations,
may serve public and private mourning purposes,
may take plain or subtle lyric forms.

Like a cenotaph for a missing subject—
which is provisional, subject to revision,
if presence displaces absence—
a quantum elegy may admit uncertainty
with regard to the subject's state of existence,

and may be overwritten, if death occurs.
If absence displaces presence.

Like imaginary cenotaphs that do not exist
beyond their designs, that express
an impossible vision of offered reverence,
a quantum elegy may be a dream-state elegy,
a letter with no return address
that never reaches its destination.

Like the temporary cenotaph,
the tomb allocated but not yet occupied,
the quantum elegy may be a placeholder.
Not so much counterfactual as conditional.
A projection of possibility, orbiting certainty.

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One of the ways in which I found new bereavement lonely
—perhaps you’ve experienced this, too:
out of delicacy, discomfort, or disinclination
to reopen a fresh wound, most people, even the kindest,
scrupulously avoided speaking to me about death.

I’d venture that the dying find in the living
a similar reluctance to broach the subject,
and that for some, this silence is painful.

When my friend is dying on the other side of the continent,
the best of my imperfect offerings may be
quantum elegy, a poem that opens a door
so death can slip softly back into conversation.

And if a quantum elegy is shared,
the subject may offer notes for revision.
You and I, and all the tenuously living,
we are always apprentices in the work of dying.

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Our beloveds, our beloved dead,
their names are engraved on us
until our bodies rest.

We are each other’s cenotaphs.

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April. During an afternoon's long ramble,
twice I am taken aback to find a gravestone etched
with a poet's name, and each time feel a pang of guilt
(*how did I not know?*), which subsides when I note
the lack of death date. *Oh*. Temporary cenotaphs.

Longfellow: "Yesterday I was at Mount Auburn
and saw my own grave dug; that is, my own tomb.
I assure you, I looked quietly down into it,
without one feeling of dread. It is a beautiful spot."

In the quantum elegy, untethered to post-mortem time,
death, with all its terrible, unjust particulars,
has passed, and is yet to come.
And so the poem may serve the elegist
as a gentle practice of memento mori.

It's on a natural rise in the topography,
Longfellow's tomb, flanked by unfurled irises
in spring. We could meet here,
when the mowers have yet to begin their work,

when from an ocean of mosses
rain seems to rise like phantom mist,
when scilla returns to flood
the beeches' shadows with purpled blue.

And if we meet here, in spring,
as ravens wheel over the cenotaphs and the tombs,
though you've understood all along,
you would draw from that well of patience
and you would let me explain:

My friend, I am writing your elegy because I love you;
I write to you now because I could die first.