The Poetry of Dennis Haskell: Stylisation and Elegy

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Abstract

In this essay I concentrate on the elegiac poetry of the Australian poet Dennis Haskell. I argue that the emphasis in Haskell's work on the quotidian, clarity of expression and the communication of emotion, has a material effect on the ways in which Haskell approaches the elegiac project: the poetic expression of grief in the face of loss. In the essay I identify three main classes of elegy in Haskell's oeuvre: elegies for fellow poets (which, after Lawrence Lipking, I call "tombeaux"); the familial elegy; and the spousal elegy. Haskell's engagement with the genre of the elegy therefore occupies a spectrum between what might be termed "public" elegies, and "intimate" elegies. As I discuss, the intimate elegies indicate a more profound, and sometimes troubled, engagement with the genre of elegy, tipping on occasion in anti-elegy and self-elegy. By undertaking textual analyses of various poems from within the three classes of elegy practised by Haskell, I illustrate the different ways in which he deals with one of the most profound problems that faces an elegist: how to express the profound emotion of grief through the affordances of poetic stylisation.

Keywords

Australian poetry, elegy, stylisation, grief, loss, quotidian

Ars Poetica

The poetry of Dennis Haskell[2] is notable for its emphasis on the everyday, clarity of expression and the communication of emotion. These three elements – thematic, stylistic and affective – come together to form what might be described as a poetics of simplicity. Such a poetics is both stylistic and attitudinal. As Haskell himself notes in a 2017 interview, he prefers "plain speech and unpretentiousness. I don't like very ornate verse. Or very ornate anything" (Rafiq 246). But as with

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[2] This essay is gratefully dedicated to Dennis Haskell, who taught me at the University of Western Australia in the 1980s, who was the first editor to publish my poetry, and who has been a model literary and scholarly citizen – expressed not least through his sense of humour – for me and others for over three decades.

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the Romantics' valorisation of poetic sincerity and spontaneity, the engagement of a poetics of simplicity means neither a programmatic rejection of stylisation (should such a thing be possible), nor an unproblematic congruence of utterance and emotion, poet and text. As Haskell implies in his autobiographical essay, "Nights of Average Nerves: Popular Culture and Me," a poetics of simplicity does not imply *simplification*.

> No critic has ever praised my poems for simplicity and I don't remember it being used as a term of praise for any other contemporary poets in reviews of their work. Yet simple poems with substance are the hardest to write and are, in their own way, more difficult than poems of intellectual complexity or technical dexterity. (10)

Simplicity, in other words, is no simple matter. Simplicity and complexity exist on a continuum, and one that no doubt differs from reader to reader. In addition, various types of complexity and dexterity can be found within lexically and/or formally uncomplicated poems. Haskell states that he likes "the old axiom, 'Art is that which hides art,' and a use of language that is skilful enough that the reader doesn't notice it, at least on first reading" ("Nights of Average Nerves" 16). Haskell's comment complicates the idea of a poetics of simplicity by showing such a poetics to actually be a paradoxically self-effacing form of stylisation. Haskell further nuances things by adverting to the importance of which poetic mode is being used at any given time: "except for comic or satiric purposes, I do not like language that draws attention to itself, unless that is the subject of the poem" ("Nights of Average Nerves" 16). Haskell has, of course, written a considerable number of comic and satirical poems.

One example of Haskell's satirical poetry is "Ars Poetica," the opening poem in *All the Time in the World* (2006). "Ars Poetica," which is Latin for "the art of poetry," is a subgenre instigated by the classical poet Horace and which implicitly or explicitly details the poet's chosen poetics. It is relatively popular with modern poets. Haskell's "Ars Poetica" illustrates the degree to which he allows himself to engage with complexity to satirise a form of complexity (which, for the sake of brevity, can be called literary theory). The poem begins with a parody of the well-known pangram traditionally used to test typewriters:

> The quick brown fox fucks the lazy metaphor
> stressed that anything from the keyboard is absurd.
> Even the keys are depressed. Hoarse and vexed
> from thinking 'Il n'y a pas de hors texte,'
> how can we cope with the world of words
> without voting for its hopeless incompleteness? (*All the Time* 5)

The opening line, with comic vulgarity, reconfigures the typographic pangram, but it is also hard not to hear a playful echo of the opening line of "Stalin's Holidays" by John Forbes, which uses the pangram in its usual form. (Forbes, coincidentally, also wrote an "Ars Poetica.") The punning "depressed" keys of the keyboard, and the liberal use of rhyme (including the eye rhyme of *hoarse/hors*), also indicates a playful tone at work. But the untranslated quotation (which is missing a hyphen) of Jacques Derrida's dictum pointedly introduces a note of melancholy to the poem. "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" means "There is no outside-text," though more controversially, and less accurately, it is sometimes understood to mean "There is nothing outside the text." Derrida's attack on logocentricism or a "metaphysics of presence" is, in Haskell's "Ars Poetica," taken to be an attack on poetry itself. But while Haskell sees a link between words and the world, as well as the "the sense's *allegria*" ("joy" in Italian), he does not end his argument with Derrida by simply inverting the French theorist's deconstruction of presence. Rather, he appears to offer a poetic reconfiguring of it.

The poem's concluding quatrain alludes to both T.S. Eliot and Ludwig Wittgenstein in its complex of imagery, which teeters between the concrete and the immaterial:

> Like a burglar interrupted, writing is incomplete
> and in its broken glass meaning arrives,
> in just that whereof we cannot speak:
> the hologram torch of language, shining on our lives (*All the Time* 5).

The association between (poetic) language and light calls to mind a mystical poetics. In its conspicuous use of metaphor (that engine-house of poetry evoked in the first line of the poem), the final quatrain of "Ars Poetica" demonstrates poetry's paradoxical ability to evoke meaning, in the form of imagery, from the non-linguistic realm. (Later in the collection, poetry itself is associated with "a thin piece of light," in contrast to "all the horror" that exists in the world [*All the Time* 13].)

I have discussed this poem in some detail because it nicely illustrates Haskell's engagement with complexity and satire. "Ars Poetica," as well as an example of literary-theoretical satire, is formally complex, highly allusive and expresses itself in four languages. It is therefore not a simple poem. Satire, it might be argued, invites complexity, since it requires an understanding of what is being satirised. Similarly, comedy, while potentially more open to simplicity, is often associated with tonal complexity, especially irony, and – like satire – shared cultural protocols and references. Even taking into account Haskell's attempt to disambiguate the satirical and comic modes from his "serious" poetry, it is the case – as Haskell himself points out ("Nights of Average Nerves" 7) – that his

"serious" poetry often includes comic and satirical moments, suggesting that the comic/serious opposition is not as simple as it may seem, just as the simple/complex opposition was not. "Ars Poetica" is notable, too, because it thematises a tension found in Haskell's "serious" poetry, especially his elegies: the tension between word and world, text and affect.

Rich qualification, of the kind that I (and Haskell) have been rehearsing, is perhaps unsurprising when discussing a poet who is also a professor of literature. But notwithstanding such qualification, I don't wish to suggest that Haskell's poetics of simplicity is somehow suspect. (A hermeneutics of suspicion is, I suspect, one of the features of modern literary theory that Haskell is most suspicious of.) Rather, I wish to consider the complexity hidden within the apparent rejection of complexity, technique and ornamentation. For Haskell, art is that which hides art, after all. Such an apparent rejection could be a kind of statement regarding where Haskell sees himself in Australian literary culture. It is also associated with an implicit valuing of extra-literary qualities. In particular, Haskell's poems are not just concerned with (the value of) the quotidian, but also with (the value of) the ordinary, a concept that exceeds the merely everyday and that has profound meaning in Haskell's poetics. As he writes in "Nights of Average Nerves," "The valuing of the ordinary is a constant and key theme of mine – I am hardly alone in using the ordinary but I don't know of other contemporary poets who have its importance as a regular theme" (14).

Such meaning is apparent in the multiple evocations of the word itself throughout Haskell's oeuvre. It is also apparent in his representation of ordinary events and occasions. These include day-to-day events such as washing dishes and arguing with one's spouse, but the ordinary is also found in the greater quotidian adventures of becoming a parent, experiencing grief and falling in love. Once again, we are in the field of paradox. Just as simplicity can be achieved through the affordances of complexity, so ordinariness is associated with the extraordinary, the mundane with the extra-mundane. As Haskell writes, again in "Nights of Average Nerves," "If we are to have any experience of the transcendent it will, I believe, come through the ordinary, and in my poems I am often trying to link the two" (14). It is of little surprise, then, that the epigraph (by David Malouf) to Haskell's 2006 collection, *All the Time in the World,* underlines Haskell's programme of poetically representing ordinariness as one that undermines common-sense understandings of what the ordinary is: "… victims, and sensational brutality and misery, are easy to imagine and identify with. What is harder to think our way into is ordinariness" (np).

The importance of ordinariness can be seen in some relief in the poem "Late Letter" (from 1993's *Abracadabra*), an elegiac poem on the English poet Philip Larkin, another poet who valued the ordinary. The poem is a "late letter" because Larkin (never named in the poem) is already dead, and it begins, perhaps appropriately given its subject, in a critical mood, noting "the bits of you I never

liked." But, as with a number of Larkin's poems, there is an important volta, which signals a shift of both tone and attitude:

> Yet, when I think of you whole
> I think of a shining humaneness.
> You convinced me
> not to be frightened
> of life's littleness,
> to value the ordinary,
> to see the grand
> pomposity of literature
> for what it is, to laugh. (*Abracadabra* 106)

The use of enjambment here skilfully wrong-foots the reader: "you convinced me…" and "to see the grand…" both suggest an emphatic rhetoric that is undermined in each case by the lines that follow those phrases. Just as stylistic simplicity does not mean simplification, the drive to ordinariness does not mean an abandonment of poetic craft.

The post-Romantic theme of valuing the ordinary is consistent throughout Haskell's five substantive collections of poetry, and – as we will see – it is most tested in Haskell's elegies for his wife, Rhonda Haskell, in *Ahead of Us* (2016). The ordinary is associated in Haskell's poetry not just with the quotidian (however broadly defined), but also with a particular ethical position. This ethical position is described by the poet Robert Gray, in his short introductory essay to *Acts of Defiance* (Haskell's 2010 New and Selected Poems), as "decency" (xv), an ascription that Haskell endorses ("Nights of Average Nerves" 16). Decency is associated with doing the right thing. Towards the end of "Late Letter," Haskell makes the following apostrophe to the absent Larkin: "You left me daring/ to hate your uncaring politics/ and value your lines/ with their immense/ message of caring" (*Abracadabra* 107). Haskell's rhyming of *daring/uncaring/caring* (as well as the lines' echoic vowel music, or assonance) is a stylistically nimble way to both associate himself with, and dissociate himself from, Larkin – even as Haskell makes a strong claim for the rehabilitation of the late poet.

But, as Haskell shows, decency is not a solemn virtue (unlike say Matthew Arnold's characteristically Victorian conception of the "high seriousness which comes from absolute sincerity"). Indeed, as the reference to laughter and seeing through pomposity in "Late Letter" suggests, it can be notably non-compliant. Decency is not just "doing the right thing," then. It also involves seeing through anything – pomposity, bad faith, ideology – that might otherwise hide the indecent. Ordinariness and decency in Haskell's poetry are ultimately humanist values that value the individual human subject over religious and ideological beliefs. The valuing of decency, lack of pretence and so on, all – according to the poet – flow from Haskell's working-class upbringing, "for the working class have

no opportunity or respect for prancing about: they have to be, as Australians used to say, fair dinkum" (Haskell, "Nights of Average Nerves" 16).

To return to the literary expression of extra-literary values, what is notable about both Gray's and Haskell's descriptions of the latter's poetry is the way in which Haskell's poetics of simplicity is nevertheless a *poetics*. To reiterate Haskell's observation, "simple poems with substance are the hardest to write," while, according to Gray, "Dennis Haskell's poetry, in which the primary effect is the human content, is often highly accomplished, in my judgment. It is not only empathetic: he is a fine poet of the aphorism and the telling phrase" (xv). Haskell is indeed a fine poet of the aphorism, and I have already touched on his use of enjambement, rhyme and assonance.

Elegy

I have worried over the apparent (and paradoxical) tension between the "content" and "form" of Haskell's poetry because I believe it is germane to his work generally. One might argue that such a tension is central to all poetic, or even literary, endeavour. But it seems especially notable in Haskell's work: a tension between a post-Romantic valuing of expression and a modernist valuing of technique. (It is notable, surely, that Haskell wrote a thesis on W.B. Yeats, that ambiguous Romantic-modernist.) But I want to think more specifically about this tension between manner and matter, because it applies especially strongly to one of the key poetic genres that Haskell has employed throughout his career: the elegy. Haskell, like most if not all contemporary lyric poets, is often elegiac in nature. That is to say, rather than being formally concerned with the death of an individual or individuals, he is more generally concerned with issues of mortality, time passing and mutability. The elegiac note is ubiquitous in Haskell's poetry. It can be heard in the use of the *ubi sunt* motif in "Visiting Friends from Henley" (from Haskell's debut collection, *Listening at Night*), and in the intimations of mortality described in the conclusion of "Evening Flight" (from *Abracadabra*).

But elegy "proper" – the formal lament for the dead – features throughout Haskell's oeuvre. Of course, the elegy remains a common genre, notwithstanding the assaults that occurred in the twentieth century (and documented by Jahan Ramazani among others) upon the conventions of the elegy's "consolatory" *raison d'être*. The elegy remains a high-status poetic genre, and its important place in Australian contemporary literary culture is sometimes remarked upon by critics and literary historians. Indeed, Haskell himself, in *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, notes that elegy constitutes a "strong and largely unrecognised Australian poetic tradition" (283). Nevertheless, even within the elegiac culture of contemporary Australia (or Anglophone poetry generally), Haskell's oeuvre is notable for its investment in the genre. Indeed, as I hope to demonstrate, I believe that Haskell has written some of the most powerful elegies in Australia in the last two decades. His elegies for fellow poets (which, after Lawrence Lipking, I call

"tombeaux"), his familial elegies and his spousal elegies will be the focus of the rest of this essay.

As well as remaining an elite genre in contemporary literary culture, the elegy continues to offer both ethical and formal challenges to poets. With the cultural and emotional stakes already high, it is not surprising that the tension between expression and technique – which I have argued is central to Haskell's poetry – is so clearly articulated in modern elegies. Indeed, the rise of the anti-elegy and the self-elegy, elements of which can be found in Haskell's oeuvre, is consistent with this generic complexity. As the expression of grief for a lost loved one, elegy should be the simplest and most sincere of poetic genres, and yet the forms of poetic expression found within that genre are always already freighted with complicated issues regarding representation, ambivalence over symbolically profiting from the dead, and the tension between private grief and public mourning. In other words, no matter how sincere the expressions of loss found within any given elegy, complex – often paradoxical – poetic issues have to be negotiated in that expression.

All elegies, in other words, seek to solve a profound, perhaps foundational, poetic problem: how to represent (and evoke) real emotion through artifice. The tolerance for elegiac artifice shifts depending on the time and the place, the occasion and the literary culture. Samuel Johnson had this to say about John Milton's pastoral elegy "Lycidas": "Where there is leisure for fiction there is little grief" (*The Lives of the Poets* 95). The tension between "fiction" and "grief" is summarised by the American poet Frank Bidart (a poet whose work is notably different from that of Haskell's) in an interview from 1983:

> All art, of course, is artifice: words in our mouths, or our minds, don't just 'naturally' happen on paper with focus, shape, or force. If, in a poem, we feel we are listening to a voice speak the things that most passionately engage it, it is an illusion. But I think that [Robert] Frost's statement is also true: 'No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader'. ("Interview" 688-89).

Once again, we are in the territory of illusion and sincerity, manner and matter.

Haskell's engagement with the elegy proper (as opposed to the more generally elegiac mode) can be seen to occupy a spectrum between what might be termed "public" elegies, and "intimate elegies." The former concern the deaths of other writers (usually poets), and the latter concern the deaths of members of Haskell's family and, most painfully, his wife, Rhonda. The intimate elegies – as one would expect – indicate a more profound, and sometimes troubled, engagement with the genre of elegy, tipping on occasion in anti-elegy and self-elegy.

Tombeaux
Lawrence Lipking, in *The Life of the Poet: Beginning and Ending Poetic Careers* (1981),

his book on poetic vocation and careers, calls elegies for poets (after Mallarmé) *tombeaux*. While the term is not especially current, it is, I believe, a useful one. At its simplest, the tombeau is a form of poetic memorialisation for a fellow poet: "The tomb of the poet is built by other poets, their verses take him in," writes Lipking (139-40). But the subgenre is not without ambiguity. As Lipking writes, there is a tension in the tombeau between "the eulogist's respect" and the "critic's animus" (145). We have already seen this in Haskell's secret tombeau for Philip Larkin, with its contrasting impulses: critiquing Larkin's limitations, and promoting his stylistic and ethical strengths. The tombeau, then, while a form of tribute is also concerned with poetic lineage and with the ambiguous process of speaking in the place of a dead/silent poetic predecessor.

Tombeaux can be discerned in Haskell's debut collection, *Listening at Night* (1984). "For Thomas Hardy" and "In Memory of Ken Slessor" memorialise two poets known for their own elegies, suggestive of the tombeau's attention to lineage and poetic continuity. The poem for Hardy evokes key Hardyesque themes. The poem begins with an ars poetica implicitly learnt from the poem's subject/dedicatee: "Start with simple things: grass, the earth, the roots of grass" (*Listening at Night* 17). This elemental imagery calls to mind the ending of Hardy's "Proud Songsters" (from Hardy's posthumous collection, *Winter Words*, of 1928) which refers to "particles of grain,/ And earth, and air, and rain" (*Listening at Night* 424). The lines "if you wish to construct a religion/ choose nothing more solid than water," and the three that follow, practically summarise Philip Larkin's poem, "Water" (20), from *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), illustrating that a multi-generational sense of poetic lineage is implied in Haskell's poem.

Haskell's tombeaux are, perhaps not surprisingly, not often marked by the kind of psychic ambivalence suggestive of a "critic's animus," but his tombeaux do thematise issues of careers and silence. For instance, in "Hand to Chin," his elegy for the biographer and fiction writer Julie Lewis, Haskell draws attention to his subject's writing career in terms of her "effortless interest in others' lives" (*All the Time* 90). The poem, while not obviously psychically conflicted, does engage in the kind of paradox typical of elegy generally. It opens with an evocation of Lewis's physical presence, but through the disembodied medium of dream: "I dream of Julie with the dark brown hair,/ not, as it shows in photographs, black" (*All the Time* 90). The poem's parody of the opening line of Stephen Collins Foster's nineteenth-century parlour song "Jeanie With the Light Brown Hair" (made famous by Bing Crosby in the 1940s) suggests an unexpectedly light tone, but such a tone is undermined after the first two stanzas by the stark monostich that disrupts the poem's stanzaic structure: "Time has its teeth and eats us up in hours" (*All the Time* 90). The "I dream of Julie" pattern returns, but a resolutely sombre tone also returns in the poem's close, which makes clear how the "dream" is evocative of profound absence: "I dream of you now, Julie, fully alone,/ where flesh becomes earth, mind becomes bone,// and you come closer the farther

you've gone" (*All the Time* 91). Interestingly, another tombeau, "12 November, 1988," subtitled "*In memoriam V.B.*" (presumably the poet-critic Vincent Buckley) also, in its last lines, uses half rhyme to imply the emotional disturbances of grief (*Abracadabra* 89).

The sense of a literary career is more discernible in "The Day Dorothy Porter Died," the first half of which reminiscence on Haskell's and Porter's shared time in acting classes ("We were/ not actors but writers" [*Ahead of US* 47]) and at the University of Sydney. The second part of the poem is a work of "cancer poetry," in which Porter, but also the poet's wife, cousin and friend, are all brought together through their shared experience of suffering from cancer. Again, the poem is notable for its allusiveness. The title calls to mind Frank O'Hara's elegy for Billie Holiday, "The Day Lady Died," and – despite the many differences between the two poems – Haskell's poem has something of that earlier poem's representation of the shock of hearing of a death while the speaker is going about his daily business. The allusiveness of "The Day Dorothy Porter Died" is also seen in the way the poem reworks the second line of Wordsworth's sonnet "The World is Too Much With Us" in the following way: "we lay waste all the gettings and comings" (*Ahead of Us* 49).

The evocation of Romantic precedents is seen in the most obviously tombeau-like of Haskell's poems for poets: his poems in *The Ghost Names Sing* (1997) on John Keats, that most career-obsessed of Romantic poets, about whom Haskell has written a critical study. "Sketched by Severn, 28 January 1821" is an ekphrastic poem regarding a pen-and-ink sketch, by Joseph Severn, of the dying Keats. According to its inscription, the sketch represents Keats at 3am, and Haskell's poem concentrates on the portrait's nocturnal aspect, especially the "haloes of shadow" around Keats's "sunken face" (*The Ghost Names Sing* 37). In Romantic fashion, these shadows are disconcertingly mobile in form, and the image of Keats's closed eyes offers a self- and pan-elegiac vision:

> but these dark shadows of hair
> or womb or misshapen stone
> are Keats's future. Their edges are like ears.
> Keats's eyes are closed,
> he sees them so deeply,
> his future, our future. (*The Ghost Names Sing* 37)

In a companion piece, "As You Are, As We Are," in which the poet visits Keats's grave (the literal tomb of the poetic tombeau), the self-elegiac note is expressed even more explicitly: "When I go to cemeteries now/ I think of Keats,/ and others he's among,/ and the dates creep up on me one by one" (*The Ghost Names Sing* 40).

Familial Elegies

The Ghost Names Sing is notable for the number of elegies that are to be found within it. Three of these are familial elegies that occupy a liminal space between the generally elegiac (concerned with the lost working-class 1950s childhood of the poet) and elegy "proper" (concerned with lamenting deceased family members). "For Fanny Elizabeth Moore" tends to the former mode, but its dedicatory title illustrates the profound link felt by the poet between his childhood and his grandmother. "The Mighty Wests" is more explicitly an elegy for a lost family member. It also marks a clear expression of an elegiac "crisis," in which the conventions of elegy are shown to be inexact tools for the expression of an ambiguous grief.

"The Mighty Wests" begins with an image of the poet at the foot of his maternal uncle's hospital bed. The note of guilt or insufficiency is sounded in the first line, as the poet has "Come out of duty, empty handed" (*The Ghost Names Sing* 19) to see his football-barracking uncle. (The eponymous Wests are a football team.) In the second numbered part of the poem, the elegiac crisis is made explicit:

> I never expected you to 'snuff it' so soon
> despite your grey-red, bloated face
> and bloated eyes.
> I think this morning of all the things
> I have which you can never enjoy again:
> tea, light breaking red, this shifting of my legs.
> And I could trot out another elegy
> for your sake—subject: a life
> utterly wasted. (*The Ghost Names Sing* 20)

We are clearly in the domain of the anti-elegy here. The anti-elegy, as R. Clifton Spargo's essay on the subject makes clear, is usually seen as a symptom of modernity. The loss of meaning once found in traditional mourning practices is associated with the medicalisation of death and mass traumatic events, such as global war, associated with the twentieth century. Such an aetiology for the anti-elegiac impulse may not immediately seem convincing in this case. The crisis in Haskell's poem is surely a personal one – how to memorialise what is seen as "a life/ utterly wasted" – rather than a crisis associated with the relationship between modernity and death. But as "The Mighty Wests" illustrates, crises of the personal and of the cultural are hard to disambiguate. Spargo's list of the "qualifying characteristics" of anti-elegy is relevant here:

> for recuperating the dead person symbolically to culture; (3) anxieties about
> the efficacy of poetry in culture; (4) indifference or hostility to mourning
> customs; and (5) expression of so-called inappropriate emotions as part of the

repertoire of grief, including aggression, resentment, or phlegmatic indifference toward the dead.

Of these, the most apparently relevant is the fifth characteristic. But, as we will see, Haskell's expression of "so-called inappropriate emotions" is also clearly linked to "skepticism about religious consolation," doubts about "recuperating the dead person symbolically to culture," and "hostility" (at least in this case) to mourning customs.

These elements are most observable in the representation, in the third section of the poem, of the uncle's funeral. The funeral offers no real meaning; even "the unexpected wreath of bright weather/ means nothing/ when hired men take everyone's attention" (*The Ghost Names Sing* 21). (Haskell's use of wrong-footing enjambement is once again notable here.) It is not surprising, then, that the "pious, gentle voice" of the service offers "words none of us will remember/ or will have ever believed" (*The Ghost Names Sing* 21). The final image, the only one that "no one denies," is of "a wisp of silent, small smoke" rising "into a small sky" (*The Ghost Names Sing* 23). Silence is a common trope in Haskell's elegies, but the shrunken sense of scale – which is clearly anti-elegiac – is not.

"The Mighty Wests" contrasts notably with Haskell's elegy for his father, "Locking the Garage Door," which appears in *Abracadabra*. Clearly, there are no doubts here about the value of the life being memorialised. Nevertheless, an anti-elegiac note, albeit less strident, can still be heard. The first part of Haskell's elegy for his father is entitled "The Miraculous Years," and it begins where Haskell's elegy for his uncle ends: the crematorium. However, in this rendering, we seem initially to be in the consoling presence of pastoral elegy. The crematorium is surrounded by trees and lively, possibly comforting, fauna. But the eponymous "miraculous years" turn out not to be the father's, but the moment of modernity that the poet finds himself in. The process by which the father's ashes are handed to his son is seen as emblematic of technology and orderly administration:

> In the years
> of miraculous
> technology
> they can order everything:
>
> the work goes on under the clocks–
> paper riffling, stamping, certification–
> while I carry to the car
> my father, neatly boxed. (*Abracadabra* 72)

The "miraculous" is here, perhaps paradoxically, the domain of technology, rather than religion or supernature. But this miraculous condition leads to a

bathetic ending, with the use of an impure rhyme – *clocks/boxed* – that is notably awkward. The caesura in the last line also suggests the shock of the "miraculous" transformation of a living human subject to ashes "neatly boxed."

After the shock of this image, the second part of the sequence, "Small Tribute," engages in a paradoxical procedure characteristic of elegy. Physicality is evoked, but ambiguously, when a spectral version of the father – which appears at the poet's bidding – crosses "the step" so that father and son can talk. But despite the consolatory aspect of this imaginary colloquy, the poet is again left with literal ashes.

> You listen a lot:
> when I try to touch you
> you become mysterious;
> when I try to love you
> you become yourself
> as you now are:
> words unspoken, ashes in a jar. (*Abracadabra* 74)

The "miraculous technology" of imagination (or poetry) is ultimately defeated by the materiality of death, or what is elsewhere in the poem called "the dictatorship of the physical" (*Abracadabra* 76).

The next two sections – "Anzac Breakfast" and "The Garage" – engage with key facets of the father's life: his status as an Anzac (or returned serviceman) and his life as a carpenter. The father has become a haunting spectral presence/absence whose "actions/ live on" ambiguously "only as objects, as oddments/ of fibre, slices of masonite, just begun toys and boxes" (*Abracadabra* 78). These unfinished toys prefigure, perhaps, the poem's last section, "Fort Da," which evokes Freud's account of his grandson's game in which the child (whose mother has briefly left him) threw away and retrieved a cotton reel with the words "fort" (gone) and "da" (there). This account is often taken to be representative of the child's self-fashioning ability to transform loss through play. But here, too, Haskell finds little in the way of consolation:

> Death makes us all children. In mourning
> Freud's grandson threw out a cotton holder
> and reeled in self-awareness. Some
> become melancholy, some imagine
> the frolicsome kindergarten of Heaven.
> Few speak. (*Abracadabra* 81)

The outcome of Haskell's elegiac crisis in his familial elegies is an emphasis on silence. Poetry is the paradoxical medium of such silence.

Spousal Elegies

Silence is a feature in "That Other Country," the long elegy sequence (or collection of elegies), for Haskell's wife Rhonda, which makes up more than half of Haskell's latest collection, *Ahead of Us* (2016). The title comes from the first poem in the sequence, which concerns the poet's wife being given a diagnosis of cancer. With that diagnosis, Rhonda Haskell immediately shifts "to another country" (*Ahead of Us* 52), one where "the noisiest sound is silence" (*Ahead of Us* 53).

The characterisation of cancer in Haskell's elegies for his wife is considerably dynamic. In "Eventually" the disease is personified, just as Death was in the Middle Ages. Haskell, like Emily Dickinson before him, revises this tradition of personification. Here "The Big C" is an unwanted visitor, like a thug standing in the doorway, "blocking out all the light" (*Ahead of Us* 54). "Eventually" is also notable for the way in which it uses rhyme:

> All Logic, Hope, Justice
> he will condense, into Luck.
> Fuck those long thoughts
> of your soul: his very howls
> will ensure you are
> a prisoner of your bowels. (*Ahead of Us* 54-55)

The abstract – almost administrative – imagery of "The Other Country" here gives way to a literally visceral, anti-poetic rhetoric. The *luck/fuck* rhyme is not only notable for its register, but for the way it forms an inelegant stress cluster, while the *howls/bowels* rhyme dramatically illustrates the bodily suffering, along with the mental anguish, caused by the disease.

Such anti-lyrical imagery is part of a relatively recent development in the poetry of mourning in which the medicalised death of a loved one is represented in graphic, often documentary-like, detail. As Sandra M. Gilbert has noted, this development is part of a contemporary culture of mourning that allows a documentary aesthetic to apply to subjects and events that, prior to the twentieth century, would have been considered unspeakable, especially in a poetic context. Haskell's poetry for his late wife is part of a growing body of spousal elegy sequences that include Douglas Dunn's *Elegies* (1985), Donald Hall's *Without* (1998) and Paul Kane's *A Passing Bell* (2018). Like these works, Haskell's represents, in powerful and profoundly moving detail, the process of his wife's illness, her death and the intense grief in the aftermath of that loss. What is notable, especially about Hall's and Haskell's collections, is the detail in which a modern *medicalised* death is represented. As Gilbert writes with regard to Hall, such an apparently anti-poetic aesthetic is not read in contemporary literary culture as lacking in respect with regard to the mourned subject: "in a late twentieth-century context, passages such as those [by Hall], strung together like

beads in a rosary of traumatic remembrance, would surely be understood to record and honour the physical as well as spiritual sufferings of both the terminal invalid and the man who mourns her" ("Elegies Upon the Dying").

Like Hall's collection, Haskell's sequence comprises of individual lyric poems, from which a narrative quickly emerges. The narrative made by Haskell's poems includes key events, such as diagnosis, treatment (chemotherapy) and an "all clear" when the cancer goes into remission for a period. Learning of this remission is described in "Who or Why or How or What." Haskell writes with powerful simplicity that "I wept, and couldn't accept it" (*Ahead of Us* 61). But "as these two words sank in," Haskell (it seems absurd to write "the poet") notes an ontological shift, in which "the waiting room, the chairs,/ the sky outside, our hands your/ turbaned wisps of withered hair,// were all new entirely" (*Ahead of Us* 61). The sense that this proves to be a momentary reprieve is felt when the next poem (a prose letter) written to Rhonda prior to "yet another operation" is keenly felt. Two poems later, in "So Much Courage," the news that the cancer has become terminal is delivered, and goodbyes to family in Sydney are made.

The death of the loved one is narrated in "Saturday Night and Sunday Morning." Anne-Marie Newton describes this multi-part poem as the "text's nadir: its still centre" (2016). This heart-breaking poem narrates the last hours of Rhonda Haskell's life: "The end, in the end, came quickly/ and astonished us all" (*Ahead of Us* 75). In extraordinarily powerful detail, Haskell narrates the last stages of the illness that afflicted his wife for six years. The poem is an extraordinary portrait of the pain and morbidity faced by a person in the last stages of cancer. Stylistically, the poem is notable for its short lines, and its ordinary, almost simple lexis. But, as with all of Haskell's poetry, there is art hiding art in this account of a loved one's last hours. Haskell continues his effective use of rhyme, and various forms of parallelism are notable throughout the poem. Both elements can be found in the conclusion to part 5 of the poem, in which Haskell employs both rhyme and zeugma in his description of his wife's last hospital arrival:

> Eventually a wheelchair appeared, pushed
> by a diminutive female nurse.
> We nursed you into it, gradually,
> and you were able to
> help a bit.
> The nurse took off immediately (*Ahead of Us* 81).

The parallelism of nurse (a noun) and nursed (a verb) highlights the fragility of Rhonda Haskell at this point, while the almost skeletal rhyme of *it* and *bit* is made more emphatic by the short line, "help a bit," and contrasts notably with the multisyllabic rhyming of *gradually/immediately*.

The poem's power is partly rhetorical in this way, but it plainly also stems from its narrative of witness. Haskell produces an almost-overwhelming sense of

action and tension to the narrative through the use of detail, of mystery (what has caused the sudden decline?), and through the uncanny business of his moving back and forth from place to place (especially house and hospital), a possible mimicking of the back-and-forth movement of a mind looking for answers. Indeed, the energy of this poem is remarkable, and, stillness, to evoke Newton's word, is really only achieved at the exhausted end of the poem. The narrative reaches its emotional climax in the description of Haskell learning the news of his wife's death. Having left the hospital at 3:30am, expecting his wife to sleep through the night, he is woken at 5:40 and told by a nurse of his wife's passing. Shocked,

> I said 'Thank you.' What do you say?
> But I did mean it in some way
> before I screamed at the empty,
> empty house, let loose
> a senseless burst of tears,
> then shakily started the phone calls
> to Sydney, three hours ahead,
> the agonizing soft drama
> of sending the unanswerable message of death. (*Ahead of Us* 85-86)

A scream is the opposite of poetry. Its appearance here is brief, but important, even as poetry reasserts itself in the oxymoronic image of "soft drama." Indeed, the "agonizing soft drama/ of sending the unanswerable message of death" is a powerful summary of what elegy is and does. The poem ends with the unbearably poignant image of the poet reluctantly leaving his dead wife's body.

After representing the funeral via ellipsis ("the funeral service is over, the flowers have died/ and the last generous family visitors/ have flown far away," *Ahead of Us* 88), the remainder of the sequence details the business of death ("Wills, certificates, accounts, cancellations," [*Ahead of Us* 90]), and the hard work of mourning, including making visits to places that were important to Haskell and his wife. It is in this work of mourning that Haskell's valuing of the ordinary is most tested, as seen in "64A Princedale Rd," which refers to both a real place in London and a photo of Rhonda Haskell at that place, which is reproduced on the cover of the book. The representation of Haskell facing both the actual flat in London, and his memory of his wife there when young, is the point where ordinariness and the extraordinary power of grief come head to head:

> … I stood opposite the door
> a pathetic figure in an ordinary street
> on an ordinary day, if a sunny day
> in London can be thought
> ordinary, and tried to hold it all

> in to me
> uncontrollably. (*Ahead of Us* 93)

Poetry is, of course, a form of control, but it is also a form of "holding," of symbolically retaining what has been lost.

The final section of *Ahead of Us* is made up of only one poem: a poem for Haskell's new grandchild. It is hard not to ask, as Newton does, if such a conclusion to this collection could be taken "as a traditionalist transformation of grief into consolation?" (2016). For Newton, the answer is

> On balance, no. The uplift of this one poem does not overturn the impression
> of a poet deep in mourning, and, still shaded by 'the dark aftermath of death,'
> the reader is left duly discomfited by the propinquity of love and grief. (2016)

I agree with this reading but would add that the concluding image of the grandfather holding his grandchild "as if I could/ stand there forever" is both a moving image of familial love, and (thanks to the "as if") a powerful acknowledgment of poetry's limitations. To think "as if" is to think poetically. The image, while part of a poem that figures the forward movement of new life, is notably static. It seeks to hold a moment (a moment of holding) via the enduring technē of poetic technique. As such, it is an appropriate point at which to end this discussion of Haskell's grappling with the reality of grief and the stylisation of elegy.

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