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The Parable of the Solicitor and the Poet

To help resolve a protracted and escalating insurance claim following a collision between his car and another motor vehicle, a poet employs the services of a local solicitor. The case requires four or five personal visits to the solicitor's office, during the course of which – and despite never having been asked directly or volunteering details of his day-to-day activities – it occurs to the poet that he has been recognised.

Words and phrases begin to enter the solicitor's conversation, delivered with a grin and a wink, and sometimes within air quotes; phrases such as 'Apologies for the mixed metaphor' or 'If you, of all people, will excuse the pun.' Eventually, on what is scheduled to be the final appointment, the solicitor utters the one sentence his client had hoped not to hear: the dreaded 'Actually, I'm a bit of a poet myself.' Later that day, the poet drives home. On the passenger seat next to him are the finalised, signed-off legal documents, bound in a pink ribbon. And outweighing them by several kilos are two shoeboxes full of poems: poems handwritten on legal foolscap in green ink, which the poet, being a poet, has of course agreed to read and comment on. It is a service he will provide for nothing, such was the unspoken expectation, even though the other document riding next to him in the vehicle is the solicitor's

bill for several hundred pounds, to be settled within ten working days.

It is, then, with a familiar sense of resigned obligation that the poet sits down some days later to dig through the strata of accumulated verse, and then with a growing sense of hubris and sympathy, as he realises after the third or fourth villanelle that the poems were written out of loss, following the death of the solicitor's sister. The poems themselves, though cliché-ridden and sentimental (cliché and sentimentality being the dual-frequency carrier signal of the inexperienced poet), are painfully sincere. It reminds the chastised poet of many of the affirming statements he has made over the years – about poetry as the ultimate democratic art form, requiring little more than pen and paper and a working knowledge of the alphabet, and how poetry offers a natural refuge for self-expression during times of emotional disturbance. He is also reminded of some of the poems that proved so pivotal and persuasive when he was first exposed to poetry; when discovering how much power and force could be stored in – and retransmitted by – such compact shapes. Poems as the Duracell batteries of language, though ones which defy some basic Newtonian principle in the sense that, with the best ones at least, their potential energy seems to increase over time.

'Methought I saw my late espousèd saint,' begins John Milton, 'seeing', in his blind state, his deceased wife appear in a form of visitation not unlike the dream vision experienced by the speaker of the medieval poem *Pearl* a quarter of a millennium earlier, also a 'pale and faint' female

figure, also ‘vested all in white, pure as her mind’. Trusting to an autobiographical reading, Milton’s evocation and near-beatification of either Katherine Woodcock, his second wife, or his first wife Mary Powell (who died the year Milton was said to have lost his sight completely), is one such miracle fuel-cell poem, one that Dr Johnson dismissed as a ‘poor sonnet’, suggesting that former students of Oxford University are not always correct in their judgements. The mournful tone and lovelorn voice of ‘Sonnet 23’, as it tends to be designated, appealed to me as a determinedly gloomy young man, moping around post-industrial northern England in a willed state of post-punk melancholia. Looking at it again in the plainer days of middle age, what strikes me about it now is the not-so-subtle preferment of the self, the promotion of the bereaved over the deceased. We meet ‘me’, ‘I’ and ‘my’ within the first line alone, then ‘me’ again in line two, then an emphatic, capitalised ‘Mine’ trumpeting the commencement of line five, given further emphasis by the indenting of preceding and following lines. And although poor Katherine, probably, or poor Mary, possibly, is given her due through the middle and later passages of the poem – as it transitions from octave to sestet, and from pagan to Christian imagery – it is the poet again, in the closing line, who has the final say. ‘I waked, she fled, and day brought back *my* night’ (my italics). Abandonment might be too strong a word to describe the concluding sentiment, but there is definitely a good old helping of one of poetry’s staple ingredients: self-pity. And to my mind, the poem is more convincing because of it, or perhaps more honest, or more real, or indeed more confessional – exquisite emptiness being a truer representation

of loss than the idealising or pedestalisation of the lost. It's something our solicitor hadn't really considered, judging by his own offerings, which were more eulogy than elegy, green in more than just their ink.

A suite of remembrance poems written over three hundred years after 'Sonnet 23' testifies to the idea that, while poetic styles evolve and bifurcate in many radical and unexpected directions, poetry's core subjects tend to remain the same. Douglas Dunn's collection *Elegies* is dedicated to his late wife, Lesley Balfour Dunn, and although the phrase 'does exactly what it says on the tin' wasn't in common usage when the book appeared in 1985, it is a useful indication of its contents. The collection is pertinent to this lecture's eventual subject – poetry's position in the actual world – in as much as *Elegies* transcended the usual reception afforded a poetry collection, even a very good one, winning the overall Whitbread Book of the Year award. That prize has since morphed into the Costa Book of the Year, a gentrifying act that has shifted its association from the tavern to the coffee house, though it's still a beverage-endorsed honour run by the same parent company. The award meant that *Elegies* was deemed not only the best book of poems in the country that year, but better than the best biography, the best children's book and – holy of holies – the best novel. Maybe it was deemed as readable and comprehensible as its competitors in those other categories, with the judges responding to its unusual approachability, possibly in comparison with other poetry of the same vintage.

Elegies is, in many ways, the classic slim paperback as we came to think of it in the eighties: a pocket-sized

book, eight inches high by five inches wide; three ounces in weight; the trademark Faber & Faber livery framing an elegant woodcut or etching; card covers enclosing sixty-four printed pages on matt paper, carrying a pre-sentiment of ageing, with most poems fitting comfortably within a single page. Of which the poem ‘Birch Room’ strikes me as especially typical. ‘She was four weeks dead,’ Dunn begins the second stanza, somewhat tersely. He goes on:

before that first
Green haunting of the leaves to come, thickening
The senses with old hopes, an uncoerced
Surrender to the story of the Spring.

From their second floor, husband and wife once sat watching nature ‘create a furnished dusk’. And later, confined by illness to an even higher storey in the building, already ascending into a more ethereal realm, his wife wishes she could still see the trees – ‘our trees’ – trees belonging to the couple as a shared possession and belonging to the real world; living organisms, rooted in earth. “‘If only I could see our trees,’ she’d say.’

Presented within inverted commas as reported speech, pedants and detractors might wonder at the poet’s wife’s aptitude for talking in syllable-perfect iambs, and might wonder the same again when she next speaks, two lines later; just as counter-pedants might find within the penultimate line a justification for such prosody in the apparent invitation to rearrange for the sake of decoration:

‘If only I could see our trees,’ she’d say,
Bed-bound up on our third floor’s wintry height.
‘Change round our things, if you should choose to
stay.’

I’ve left them as they were, in the leaf-light.

Note the courageous reverse foot in that last phrase, a sudden about-face against the steady iambic progression, as if the poet has broken the fourth wall of the poem through a shift in stress, spinning around to address us directly, the abrupt metrical confrontation serving as a reconstruction of his own exposure to the sudden dappled brightness. Also, the narrow confines of the page have forced the typesetter to carry over the word ‘stay’ onto a line of its own, and the term takes on an unintentional poignancy when presented as a solitary expression in physical isolation, as either invitation or imperative (or both). A further consequence of that ‘turn-over’ is the shunting of the final line into its own space, privileging the griever over the departed once again: Dunn the last figure on stage in the final scene, like Milton, before the curtain comes down; Dunn spotlight by daylight, Milton forsaken for the night, both poems of the ‘methought’ variety.

The next poem in *Elegies* is ‘Writing with Light’, on the facing page. Open the book between pages twenty-two and twenty-three, and sunlight reactivates these two poems of shadow and illumination, of black marks against a white (or by now yellowing) page. Close the book to entomb them once again. It’s a kind of satisfying materiality that the Kindle has never managed to replicate, despite the inflammatory

promise of its name. Ditto the Kindle's superior model, the equally non-combustible Kindle Fire, whereas the Paperwhite Kindle seems to have conceded these limitations and gone back to the drawing board. (Other electronic readers are available, and similarly two-dimensional.)

Returning to our parable, the poet compiles a long letter thanking the solicitor for sharing his work, commenting on his brave and heartfelt verses, and gently addressing some of the shortcomings of the poems through positive criticism and suggested reading, including Milton, Dunn, the *Pearl* poet and others. He posts his letter, and receives in reply . . . no thanks whatsoever – not even an acknowledgement of receipt – though five months later, an envelope does fall onto his doormat bearing the name and logo of the practice, with a note from the solicitor pointing out that, due to an earlier miscalculation, there are outstanding charges relating to the insurance claim, and for the sake of balancing the books could the poet please send a cheque at his earliest convenience for the sum of three pounds and eleven pence. Still in possession of the two shoeboxes full of poems, and with winter coming on, the poet makes his first visit of the year to his wood-burning stove. Let us consider that, just for a few heart-warming and hand-warming minutes, the books were indeed balanced.

One of my themes – I say this almost two thousand words in – is the situation of poetry, its standing in this world, which, after almost thirty years as a practising poet (practising in the Gravesian sense of being forever apprenticed to an unachievable goal), I'm still as curious and

concerned about as I was at the outset. However I range back and forth in these lectures – from Milton to Douglas Dunn, from Chaucer to the latest T. S. Eliot Prize winner – it will be a recurring theme of my appointment here at Oxford. Four years from now, if I'm still here (if I haven't disgraced myself to the point of dismissal, or expired in the meantime), it's my intention to be still pursuing this question, puzzling over the position that poetry and poets might occupy in the early phases of the twenty-first century, and positions they have occupied in the past. Some of you, with your brilliant degrees, will be well into marvellous, well-remunerated careers by then – in the City perhaps, or even as solicitors. You'll be standing in the nose cone of the Gherkin, or at the pinnacle of the Shard, or in a high office in Inner Temple, looking north-west along the vector of the M40; or you might be flying over Oxford in the business class section of the plane, in front of the grey retractable veil that separates two worlds, where the seats are a little wider and the crew a little more obliging. It will be 2019, a Tuesday afternoon in Trinity term, and you'll look yonder or look down and suddenly think, I wonder if he's still there, in that big hall, banging on about it.

Poetry: it beguiles and perplexes. The Monday after my election to this position was announced, I was in Liverpool Lime Street Station, waiting for a train back across the Pennines, and decided to conduct a little non-scientific market research in W. H. Smith. Liverpool: European Capital of Culture in 2008, a city extrovert in nature, characterised by an overt interest in the humanities and the arts, revelling in dialogue, and relishing the playfulness and possibilities of

words; a city proud and practised in linguistic self-expression. W. H. Smith: the nation's foremost high street newsagent, and, although not exactly a Waterstones or a Hatchards or a Blackwell's, still a vendor of books as far as the general public are concerned, and this particular branch located in a station, servicing passengers about to spend time in a relatively distraction-free environment – i.e. a captive audience in a cornered market. Forgetting whatever trite, centre-justified, italicised platitudes were printed within the dozens of cellophane-wrapped greetings and sympathy cards, I can report that on the shelves of that shop there was not a single book, magazine, periodical or journal that carried any contemporary poetry, despite a selection that covered some pretty niche territories. (In fact, if the titles on offer were anything to judge by, subjects more popular than poetry include wood-turning, bus-spotting and practical pig-keeping.) The remaining unsold copy of *Literary Review* contained no published poetry, nor did it review any that month.

Poetry: it intrigues and bemuses. As a subject, it thinks a great deal of itself and takes itself incredibly seriously, but the status and regard it affords itself rarely seem to be reflected in the civilian population.

Poetry: it compels and repels. Collections are published to universal indifference, and yet the very number of people in this venue today says something about its abiding importance. It was presumptuous of me to have written that sentence in advance, I admit, but if there had been only three people in this room I would have used the attendance figure to make the same point, namely that to the vast majority of people – even to the majority of readers – it seems an

irrelevance or, occasionally, a joke.

Two recent performances by the actor Ralph Fiennes illustrate the point. In the Wes Anderson film *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, Fiennes plays the dandified concierge and occasional gigolo Monsieur Gustave H., whose habit of quoting ornate rhetorical verse at moments of high drama draws scowls and yawns from allies and enemies alike. In his portrayal of Jack Tanner in last year's National Theatre production of Shaw's *Man and Superman*, the boot was on the other foot: this time it was Fiennes's turn to scowl and yawn, as the bandit Mendoza quoted reams of vapid romantic verse composed for his true love Louisa. '[He recites, in rich soft tones, and in slow time]' is Shaw's stage direction, before Mendoza declares,

Louisa, I love thee.

I love thee, Louisa.

Louisa, Louisa, Louisa, I love thee.

One name and one phrase make my music, Louisa.

Louisa, Louisa, Louisa, I love thee.

Mendoza thy lover,

Thy lover, Mendoza,

Mendoza adoringly lives for Louisa.

There's nothing but that in the world for Mendoza.

Louisa, Louisa, Mendoza adores thee.

Shaw writes, 'TANNER [all but asleep, responds with a faint groan.]' Mendoza summarises the situation: 'Doggerel to all the world: heavenly music to me!'

Poetry: it enriches and it embarrasses. If I had a pound for every time someone had sent me the Gary Larson-style greeting card depicting a bookish man in an armchair and another man bound and gagged at his feet, above the caption ‘ON WEDNESDAYS, FRANK WOULD EXPLAIN HIS POETRY TO ME’ (with ‘FRANK’ replaced by ‘Simon’), I would be sitting at the front of the plane, on the other side of the all-important retractable veil.

And if the over-earnest and self-interested poet is an easy target for satirists, poetry itself is often portrayed as an elevated and abstruse concoction that would mock those not worthy of its complexities, as Detective David Mills finds out in the David Fincher film *Seven*. Following a hunch that a serial killer is modelling his modus operandi on ancient texts, and having crossed the road from the public library, with rain pounding on the roof of his car, Mills (played by Brad Pitt) is less than five seconds into reading when he slams the book against the steering wheel and offers the following critique of *The Divine Comedy*. And I quote: ‘Fucking Dante, goddamn poetry-writing faggot piece of shit,’ adding a final and exasperated ‘fucker’ to his list of analytical terms, before flinging the Dante to the back seat. His outburst carries echoes of a classmate of mine from secondary school, where the English O-Level exam included a ‘blind criticism’ section (now rebranded as the ‘unseen paper’), in which pupils are required to analyse a poem they have never previously laid eyes upon. The poem in front of me in the summer of 1979 was a piece called ‘The Golden Plover’, which I have never managed to find again, and may well have

been concocted by the chief examiner entirely for study purposes. From James Edmund Fotheringham Harting's *The Ornithology of Shakespeare* – one of only about a dozen books in my parents' house when I was a child, sandwiched between Pears' *Cyclopaedia* and the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* on the top shelf of the bureau – I happened to know that the golden plover was a bird. A bird not actually mentioned by Shakespeare, but listed as a 'rain bird' by Harting: hence *Pluvialis*, for its reported habit of becoming restless prior to a downpour. It is a trait that Shakespeare ascribes to another species in *As You Like It*, Act IV, Scene i: 'more clamorous than a parrot against rain'. But my classmate was convinced that with its flashy wings and estimable velocity, the 'Golden Plover' was an American car. He was humiliated by the poem, and has remained wary of poetry – even hostile towards it – from that day.

Poets like to quote Shelley, glorying in the backhanded compliment of being 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world', but the truth is that, to most of the world, they are simply unacknowledged. It calls to mind our solicitor again; something of a legislator himself, or at least an agent of the legislature. What he really sought from the poet was not a reading list and a few writing tips, but confirmation of poetic talent. When no such confirmation was forthcoming, he resumed normal transactional relations with the world, by dispatching an invoice. And if poetry makes the news, it is usually because someone has embarrassed themselves or fallen foul of the rules. A version of Sayre's law seems to come into play where poets are concerned,

in which the intensity of feeling generated by any dispute is inversely related to the potential gains – i.e. backbiting and sniping is so rife and aggressive among poets because the stakes are so low. And yet the most highly esteemed of our practitioners inherit a resting place at the heart of one of our most sacred and iconic temples. So, when a berth in the stonework of Westminster Abbey was recently made available for Philip Larkin, BBC arts editor Will Gompertz duly popped up on national news to relay the fact that Larkin would be sleeping for eternity with the canonised best of 'em. Meanwhile, the living bumble on.

It is not for the want of trying. Every year, there are an uncountable number of attempts to raise poetry's profile above the horizontal. We even have a National Poetry Day, fighting for attention in a crowded October schedule of awareness-raising initiatives, including World Animal Day, World Smile Day, Seed Gathering Sunday and Humphrey's Pyjama Week. Enterprises abound, and of all the efforts to improve poetry's stature within society, hike up its potential in the marketplace and alert the general public to its benefits, competitions and prizes are seen by many as the most effective. I've mentioned the individual categories and grand slam setup of the Costa Book Awards. The two other major annual prizes are the T. S. Eliot and the Forward. The T. S. Eliot Prize has embraced a talent show format (with echoes of the school spoken English competition), whereby shortlisted authors perform before the judges and a live audience on one night and the winner is announced the following evening. The Forward Prizes are delivered courtesy of a 'live announcement', the 'losing' authors

required to put on the bravest of brave faces. Rarely do any of the prizes provoke more than a few column inches of reaction in the press the following day – unless, of course, someone has misbehaved.

The winner of the 2015 Forward Prize for the Best Collection, and a shortlisted title for the T. S. Eliot Prize, was Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*. *Citizen* became 2015's poetry event, winner also of at least two big poetry prizes in the States and – get this – a *New York Times* bestseller, up there with John Grisham, Anne Tyler, Jeffrey Archer and the like. As an indication of its success, *Citizen* is now one of those books with a rosette-like sticker on the front cover announcing its accolades, and at least one of Rankine's previous publications has been reissued with the phrase 'Author of *Citizen*' on it.

Poetry periodicals, magazines and journals tend to be ruminative rather than reactive, pensive rather than prompt, and are often slow to offer their responses to new books. Poetry gets pitifully few notices in the British press, though when and where it does, we're blessed with perceptive reviewers and critics, by and large, who can translate some of the arcane specificities of poetry for a non-specialist general reader. Kate Kellaway is one such reviewer, and she began her appraisal of *Citizen* in the *Observer* by stating that the question of whether the book is poetry or not becomes less significant page by page. The historical complaint against any kind of poetry that didn't practise recognised techniques was often summarised by the phrase 'chopped-up prose', a criticism that can't be levelled at Rankine's book,

since much of it retains a conventional prose appearance, with no chopping whatsoever. But rather than being insignificant, the extent to which it is classifiable or even recognisable as poetry is intensely relevant, given *Citizen's* subtitle, *An American Lyric*, a subtitle she also applied to her book *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, published over a decade before. Section I is delivered in paragraph form, detailing wounding examples of everyday racism – some casual, others calculated – each one presented as a moral conundrum. It's a syntactical style reminiscent of lifestyle magazine questionnaires, as if a set of multiple-choice responses might follow. Section II is even less obviously poetic, being a polemical essay about the American tennis player Serena Williams, written in matter-of-fact prose. Within it comes the book's most arresting idea and its underlying motif, Zora Neale Hurston's line 'I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background,' of which Glenn Ligon's stencilled canvas, says Rankine, 'seemed to be ad copy for some aspect of life for all black bodies'. That canvas is reproduced in the book along with other visual images, including a frame-by-frame replay of Zinedine Zidane's headbutt to the chest of Marco Materazzi in the 2006 football World Cup final after an alleged racist insult. This colour contrast, exemplified by a black sports star in the lily-white world of tennis, is Rankine's central concern; in a voice that is sometimes infuriated and sometimes incredulous, but often despairing and dejected, her paragraphs eventually fragment into sentences, and the prose eventually disintegrates or crystallises towards the poetic. Any 'lyricism' to be found here is sporadic, or ironic, or

unconventional, or subverted, or insists on a poetic that runs contrary to the historically determined definitions of that term. Certainly the concept of the line as a ‘bar’ of poetic notation appears to carry little weight here, governed, it would seem, by a typesetter’s hand rather than the customary laws of poetic composition (for example, there is a noticeable difference in lineation between the UK and American editions, suggesting that page size and publishing format has dictated the layout, rather than author discretion). ‘Baudelaire envisaged readers to whom the reading of lyric poetry would present difficulties,’ wrote Walter Benjamin in the opening of his ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’. Maybe Rankine envisaged a similar readership, or wanted to reach beyond the usual cognoscenti, towards excluded or under-confident readers, or those too busy to unravel tightly bound knots of language; the fact that *Citizen* doesn’t look like a book of poems either from the outside or within may well have proved part of its popularity. ‘Form’ here is reduced, or essentialised, to the stark presentation of black words against the white background of the page, mirroring the poet’s argument. *Citizen’s* continued topicality has also led to its continued appeal, for example, through Rankine’s referencing of the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the reverberations of which are still being detected on cultural and political seismographs across the United States and beyond.

Throughout *Citizen*, Rankine refers to herself in the second person. The effect is to universalise, to implicate the reader in the process of societal marginalisation, and to insist on an empathic involvement in the incidents being

documented – whether to feel that blunt monochromatic contrast or to live the experience of a person or a people reduced not just to the status of second-class citizens but to a kind of nullified invisibility. Occupied spaces and unrecognised lives: a seat not offered on a train; the cover image of the book itself, showing a detached black hood without a face, set against whiteness. Combining text with visual images and stylised typography, at one point she offers an evanescently presented list of names, victims of race crimes, in memoriam, fading from black to grey and then to nothing as it descends the page. Chillingly, the list has been added to in subsequent editions, with spaces reserved for future victims, like a macabre roll of honour anticipating more deaths through continuing racist killings.

Citizen, then, carries the mood of public awareness and has been carried by it. But even beyond the newsworthy and the relevant, there are signs of vitality, strength and even popularity in the world of poetry – voices making themselves heard above the usual low-level background hum. Over the last couple of decades or so, a poetic movement has emerged, or re-emerged, through events in clubs and cafes and bars; a movement that thrives in live environments, particularly at summer festivals, many of which now have a dedicated poetry venue. I've been to those festivals – have stood in the mud, sprawled on the straw matting, perched on the arms of old settees at some of the shabbier of the shabby chic events – and have witnessed audiences of hundreds, sometimes thousands, with an appetite for unaccompanied language. Some of its practitioners in those environments are visitors from the music

or stand-up comedy arena, for whom poetry is a vehicle rather than a vocation, and some of what is vocalised is facile. Others, though, resist the cheap gags, the vacuous ‘life-affirming’ statements, the soliciting of an instant response and the over-emoted serving of already over-egged puddings. And among those who have surpassed their contemporaries, Kae Tempest is the most prominent.

Once categorised and perhaps demeaned by the literati as a ‘performance poet’, Tempest’s reputation has burgeoned with the very force of their surname, to the point where the poetry establishment has been unable to ignore them. Their across-the-board appeal has seen them appear on one of the main stages at the Glastonbury Festival and receive the Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry in close succession, and along with Professor Brian Cox – whose universal atomic abundance seems greater even than that of hydrogen – they are someone who regularly appears across the full spectrum of BBC radio networks.

In 2014, and with a respected ‘literary’ poetry imprint, Tempest published *Hold Your Own*, a collection of their work that either inadvertently or unashamedly laid bare the breeze-block foundations of rhyme and repetition around which their poems are constructed. For example, in ‘On Clapton Pond at dawn’, end words include ‘new’, ‘true’, ‘you’, ‘you’, ‘you’, ‘you’, ‘through’, ‘rooms’, ‘through’, ‘view’, ‘you’, ‘you’, ‘you’, ‘do’, ‘new’, ‘fuel’, and ‘you’ – so it wouldn’t be difficult to criticise Tempest on the basis that the visual, printed manifestations of the work fail to convey the winning combination of verbal dynamism and disarming innocence that has become

their trademark and has won them so many admirers. But to demote them to a literary subset on that basis would be to insist that the printed form of poetry is its primary mode, with performed or spoken versions playing a supporting or secondary role – poetry having a day out, as it were. This is a churlish position to take, I'd argue, because even after Caxton, and for a long while, poetry continued to be a spoken or recited art, with an emphasis on sonic and acoustic properties, and even through its most bookish and mute phases there have always been performers and performances. And prior to that, when conducted in the mead hall or around the campfire or at the temple or in the amphitheatre, poetry's instinctive address was to the ear rather than the eye, and writing was a means of warehousing and distribution rather than the product itself. In those wider and longer terms, we could even think of Kae Tempest et al. as defenders of poetry's original practices: traditionalists, if you like. At another level, Tempest has put the body back into poetry, bestowing their work with a presence and a physicality that, once seen and heard, goes on inhabiting the poems through to their printed iterations and delivering a tantalising sense of human proximity. Many other poets operate at a remote distance and from behind the fire curtain of the book, practitioners of a plastic art. Tempest's poetry, however, is made of air rather than ink, and other poets like them have achieved astonishing popularity in a relatively short space of time. The numbers are staggering. Millions upon millions of people have watched clips of spoken word poets in action, in quantities that the poetry world

has never previously dealt with. Recalibration has been necessary. Noughts have been added.

The Internet created, and goes on creating, a silicon revolution in poetry. It was initially a means of sharing and circulating information and work, but latterly it has been a self-referencing cosmos, a beginning and an end and a middle as well, justifying itself to itself by virtue of itself. Hence Alt Lit, a movement that flourishes via websites, blogs, forums, vlogs and film clips, populated by poets, readers and critics whose very identities are sometimes online constructs. The virtual has become the real, or at least the norm. Much of this kind of thing is like a dog whistle to me, beyond my range of hearing, and even following links from one site to another, I haven't really been able to determine whether Alt Lit is a serious and coherent poetic school or just a few computer-literate graffiti artists with too much bandwidth at their disposal, suffering from the burden of free choice in the twilight of Western decadence, goofing around in their dorm after a few joints. Another movement that tends to be mentioned in relation to new trends or directions in poetry is that of conceptualism, or 'uncreative writing', a discipline that encourages the appropriation, manipulation and reframing of existing texts, rather than the production of new work. In 2015, Kenneth Goldsmith, one of its leading figures, gave a thirty-minute reading constructed entirely from Michael Brown's autopsy report, offering it as a kind of 'found' poem – a performance that drew an angry response on social media, including a death threat. And poetry was newsworthy again.

The definition of poetry is never a fixed coordinate or a permanent value. Although the Internet is currently testing and stretching that definition at an unprecedented rate, with unpredictable consequences, there will always be those for whom the book and the art of poetry are inseparable. I am probably one of them, and I mentioned the physical qualities of Douglas Dunn's *Elegies* as a way of acknowledging the relationship between its material properties and my recollection, and appreciation, of the poems. The smell and texture of the paper, the heft of the collection, how it sat in the hand and where it stood on the shelf; whether a poem lay on a verso or a recto; whether the encampment of a stanza occupied the top or middle or bottom of a page; the typographical 'accent' of the chosen font, which became almost palaeographic in the mind's eye; where I was when I read a particular line.

Such a synaesthetic reaction is part of the wider poetic experience, as well as a way of encoding a poetic encounter in the memory – particularly those that have been personally decisive or pivotal. Like my encounter with Geoffrey Moore's *The Penguin Book of American Verse*, meeting and being met by the likes of Kenneth Koch, Weldon Kees, Ed Dorn and Gwendolyn Brooks, and developing, almost overnight, a preference for the speaking and singing voice in poetry over the written or the cerebral voice. I discovered a partiality for the demotic over the rhetorical, a predilection for poems commissioned by the mind but designed by the mouth, and a determination to 'think with the wise' but 'speak with the vulgar', as Emerson once put it. All that ideology feels encoded within the yellowing, annotated

pages and disintegrating spine of a paperback I have had to re-cover on several occasions. Moore's anthology was an impulse buy, if only in the sense that there were no other poetry books for sale in Huddersfield's Greenhead Books that day, and my impulse was to make a purchase. Its effects were entirely accidental, an experience that would encourage me to trust the serendipitous and the coincidental in future reading.

Three decades later, a similarly unanticipated and similarly transatlantic offering arrived in the form of *The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop*, which only just managed to wriggle through my letterbox and then belly-flopped onto the floor. I don't know who sent it, why they sent it or, more worryingly, where they obtained my address. (Living in south Huddersfield is rarely a life of unalloyed gratification and lotus-eating luxury, but one thing it does afford is a certain level of privacy.) True to its uninvited appearance, *The BreakBeat Poets* is brusque in its stance and confrontational in its approach. 'Poetry, and often art in general, is taught through the lens of a eurocentric, white supremacist, boring-ass canon,' remarks co-editor Kevin Coval in the Introduction. It's unapologetic in the scale of its convictions, claiming that 'hip-hop made poetry an everyday thing well before Billy Collins,' 'Hip-hop made poetry relevant,' and 'Hip-hop saved American poetry. Made it new, fresh, made it something anybody gave a fuck about.' Keats, writing to John Hamilton Reynolds in 1819, famously remarked that 'English ought to be kept up.' Not propped up, I hope, in order meet some masonically

agreed standard of practice, but kept in touch with the changing dynamics of English as it evolves and mutates, as it is shaped by internal pressures and external influences. Exposure to this has increased exponentially since the Romantic era, particularly since the advent of electronic media, which have played a huge role in turning hip-hop into a lingua franca, practised by many word artists the world over. And yet the poem from this anthology that caught my eye is largely unrepresentative of the collection as a whole, and has a less obvious relationship with hip-hop in terms of its rhythms and registers. Aracelis Girmay's 'Elegy in Gold' also appeals because it intersects with my thematic undercurrents of remembrance and light, black and white. What might my poet-solicitor have learned from its manoeuvres and subtleties, from the combination of its physical modesty and the extravagancies of its ambition?

Another of the ways in which the Internet has transformed literature is by short-circuiting the insulation between reader and writer. Most authors, no matter how reclusive, are only a couple of keystrokes away from those on the receiving end of their work. In about thirty seconds, not only had I tracked down Aracelis Girmay to an address at an American college (admittedly something of a given with US-based poets), but I had also emailed her, introducing myself and inviting her to tell me about the poem's origins and intentions. The Internet has conditioned us to expect an instant answer; having not heard back after twenty seconds, I decided to take matters into

my own hands and resort to some old-fashioned close reading, speculative analysis and personal interpretation. Coming cold to the poem and the poet, in some senses I was back in the examination hall with ‘The Golden Plover’, free to adventure among its lines and stanzas and make of it what I could.

‘Elegy in Gold’ dangles there like the chain of its final line. Fashioned and worked into short couplets, the poem opens with illuminated examples of everyday life; commonplace ideas are touched by the Midas-like hand of the poet, a gilded inventory linked by half-rhymes and internal echoes, a list that becomes more particular, personal and intimate as it progresses. I take ‘dog breath’ to be affectionate, literal even – I’m thinking golden retriever, with the sunlit steam from the kettle completing a picture of domesticity, following ‘my love’s / elbow’. But these glints and glimmers are illusions, mirages, because what follows is an abrupt transition, a change to a minor key not even anticipated by a grammatical conjunction or preposition; where the celebratory tone is immediately undercut by the void of the stanza break between lines six and seven. ‘Kettle’ and ‘steam’ find their rhyming counterparts dispersed across two lines, fragmented into ‘rubble’ and ‘the sunk ship’s dream’. The trapdoor opens, and suddenly we are delivered into a post-traumatic landscape, among the disappointed and dispossessed. The myth of Eldorado, the barbarism of the slave trade, the drowned hopes of a race, the fallout from 9/11 and the aftershock of major cultural collisions involving the Americas seem to be referenced in those next four stanzas. It’s as if the

optimism of those early lines has been projected through some kind of malevolent prism, splintering the light source not into a spectral rainbow but into shadow and shade. It's as if a reverse alchemy has taken place, turning gold into debris and dust, transmuting shine and glow into emptiness and absence. 'I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.'

'Elegy in Gold' strikes me as sociological counterpart to the autobiographical 'Sonnet 23' and the photographic negative of Dunn's 'Birch Room': not so much a 'me-thought' as an 'us-thought', an elegy for a people, where the golden chain – that ostentatious piece of jewellery, that token of swagger and bling, displayed here as the poem's only overt simile – becomes a corrosive reminder, an ironic rosary, a bond, a shackle, a yoke and a bind. Just for a moment, the restrained, elegiac, lyric voice finds a role and a place in the hectic, verbose, fact-fuelled, know-it-all world, where many things that glitter are not gold.