The Here and the Gone: On the Representation of Absence and the Ephemeral in Modern Poetry

The persona of the Wallace Steven’s poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” wonders whether he prefers the actual event of a blackbird whistling or the moments just after (92). After driving through familiar roads in his home state, the narrator of the Charles Wright poem “Lonesome Pine Special” proclaims that “all beauty depends upon disappearance” (67). In the Spencer Reese poem “Cape Cod,” rocking chairs on a porch rocked “regardless of whether or not people rocked in them." (27). All of these examples illustrate the representation of absence and the ephemeral. In some cases, the representations are stated outright for the reader to ponder, while in others they are approximations or are indirectly hinted at in the form of a well-crafted image.

The various types of absence I wish to address here constitute an attained understanding between poet and reader via a mutual consideration of a void by its representation, whether in the form of an image, an allusion, a formulaic technique or an out-and-out statement. In the examination of that which is ephemeral or transient in poetry, I believe we human beings experience a shared fulfillment. In creating a common language to identify and consider a particular way of approaching or observing absence and the ephemeral, we offer each other corroboration of the fleeting nature of our own lives.

Because one of the basic elements of a successful poem often lies in its silences and innuendos, we can also refer to the “almost said,” as another form of absence. In what is not said or not said directly, we frequently find the poem’s deepest underlying
meanings. Whether in the strategic use of punctuation, white space between lines or stanzas, an insinuation, or the implied opposite of an emotional or psychological state, what the poem is not saying can offer the highest impact for the reader.

Finally, societal and psychological constructs are yet another form of the ephemeral, and they represent a kind of artifice that ultimately results in an intangible concept, a kind of make-believe internal world that cannot be touched or felt in the physical world. These concepts are unseen, and therefore represent a kind of absence.

Section I: The Invisibility of Artifice and Construct

“A word is elegy to what it signifies.”
--Robert Hass Praise 4

I quote the above line from the Robert Hass’s poem “Meditations at Langunitas” (4) because, for me, it is an example of a piece of writing that I immediately believed to be true—even though it resists quick interpretation. The line resonates on a subconscious, hard-to-access level. Hass was surely reacting to the Deconstructionist assertion that all of society’s agreed upon definitions are invented, and therefore all words have nothing tangible to refer to. I, too, eventually came to conclude that the line means a word is an agreed upon construct that represents a thing, and the mere utterance of it presents a kind of transitory experience; that is, the verbalization of a word brings what it signifies—an object, a person, a place, a concept—to an immediate and brief life, while the silence that follows offers a kind of eulogy, a pause for reflection by both the listener and the speaker. We live with the knowledge of how transient our lives are, but words appear to be even more transitory. With their sometimes murky and multiple definitions, words live for
brief moments in the sound that emanates from our throats and the constructed definitions we attribute to them. Because of their fragility, the mere saying of words contains a kind of mourning for what they symbolize. We spark the word to life and simultaneously bury it as it dissipates in the air between listener and speaker; the auditory act and the agreed upon meaning of the word crash to the ground within moments.

Like a bird lifting from a branch, words are both present and in flight almost at the same time. A kind of resurrection takes place, of course, in the head of the listener and speaker as the words and accompanying images are processed, absorbed and countered. Although the idea of a word being elegy to what it signifies represents a kind of linguistic construct, the idea overlaps into societal and cultural constructs.

I believe the examination of any kind of a psychological construct is also the examination of personal illusions, which, by their very nature, are not made of tangible matter. Illusions do not exist in the physical world. In a sense, they are non-existent, ephemeral thoughts and feelings. The labels we assign things in our world and all the ramifications of those labels are simply agreed upon illusions. If a thing, like a table, is what it is because we say it is, then surely our closest held ideas and beliefs regarding our most intimate relationships are also constructs. Through language, we assign meaning and content to everything that touches our lives. These meanings inevitably make strong links to our emotions and our intellect.

In his long poem “Falling Water,” poet John Koethe writes “I think people are the sums of their illusions.”(69) He asserts that it is more than the tangibles in life that we imbue with meaning, but also the intangibles, such as intimate relationships. In this poem, Koethe draws on a trip to view Frank Lloyd Wright’s architecture to explore an
internal dialog in which he dissects the disintegration of a marriage, through the common
illusions we create out of romantic love and their relation to the larger illusions which
constitute a life. Koethe juxtaposes the building of exterior spaces (in this case a house)
with our creation of interior emotional spaces. Koethe comments on the psychological
constructs we rely on to build the experience of a relationship:

All those years were real, and their loss was real,
And it is sad – I don’t know what else to call it.
I’m glad that both of us seem happy. Yet what
Troubles me is the way what used to be a world
Turned out, in retrospect, to be a state of mind,
And no more tangible than that. (69)

Koethe’s lines emphasize that no matter how “real” moments, relationships or a span of
years in our lives may seem to us; they are, nonetheless, stories that we make up out of
experiences. These events may constitute what we believe to be “a world,” or more
pointedly our world, but in the final analysis they are “a state of mind, / And no more
tangible than that.” As Koethe writes “All those years were real, and their loss was real,”
but anything that we may label as “real” is “real” simply because we feel that is it, and
state that it is to the world at large.

The acceptance of this belief begs the question: what is real? Could it be anything
that we choose to label as such? We make our lives up as we live them and we continue
to embellish and rely on those stories once they are memories. The most powerful
experiences and relationships of our lives turn out to be no more tangible than any other
experience. Their rank of importance in our lives exists in the mind. We may also feel
that these experiences exist in the heart, but isn’t the idea of a heart, in the figurative
emotional sense, another construct that exists in the mind? Regardless, I believe, like
John Koethe, that each of us is the sum of our illusions. What we believe to be true about ourselves can only culminate via experiences and their retained memories. Our memories may be thoughts that come and go, but in the end they are the only element of our lives we can call “real.”

Section II: The Elusive Definitions of Self

Another psychological construct can be seen in the definitions that we rely on to help us define our sense of self and our individuality, and are perhaps more of a private artifice than public.

Several years ago at a community reading and interview, Mark Doty was asked by Seattle City Librarian Nancy Pearl what his obsession was. That is, what was that one thing (idea, question, yearning.) that he found himself writing about again and again? Doty answered Ms. Pearl’s question with the persistent internal question that was his obsession: “How am I a self when I am constantly disappearing?” Doty’s response resonated so deeply with me that I nearly fell out of my chair, and consequently ended up using his lines for the opening of one of my own poems entitled “Vanishing Point.” I have since come to believe that in some way most poets ponder and grasp at an answer to this same question. Is not the ultimate absence that of ourselves? Not only in our death, for that is the absolute absence, the one that nullifies any action or response on our part, but in the realization that perhaps the self-definition we assign ourselves is simply another construct, like time and language, and built upon the shaky ephemeral ground of memory and experience.
In her poem “In the Waiting Room,” Elizabeth Bishop wrote of what seems like an extension of Doty’s question – the realization of being an individual while also being a member of the larger human tribe, with all its frailties and endings. In this poem, the young Elizabeth looks at pictures in a *National Geographic* while waiting for her aunt at the dentist’s office. The early winter evening is dark; the waiting room crowded with stoic adults. The atmosphere of her immediate situation and the foreign, frightening pictures of erupting volcanoes and African women dancing bare-chested all contribute to an illumination of her own individuality as well as her membership in the human race. She hears what she thinks is an *Oh* of pain from inside the dentist’s office, a sound that she presumes is emanating from her foolish aunt. But she soon realizes otherwise:

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What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was *me*:
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I—we—we were falling, falling,
our eyes glued to the cover
of the *National Geographic*,
February, 1918.

I said to myself: three days
and you'll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world.
into cold, blue-black space.
But I felt: you are an *I,*
you are an *Elizabeth,*
you are one of *them.*
*Why* should you be one, too?
I scarcely dared to look
to see what it was I was.
I gave a sidelong glance
--I couldn't look any higher--
at shadowy gray knees,
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trousers and skirts and boots
and different pairs of hands
lying under the lamps.
I knew that nothing stranger
had ever happened, that nothing
stranger could ever happen. (Bishop 60)

The child in the waiting room is so overcome by her own insight that she has a physical
response, a sense of instability at the oncoming realization: “I--we--were falling, falling,
and the sensation of falling off / the round, turning world. / into cold, blue-black space.”

The realization that membership in the human race means that one will eventually join
the great void of “cold, blue-black space” is an overwhelming one for all of us, much less
a six-year-old. The corresponding flip-side of the child’s existential epiphany is then
stated outright in these lines: “But I felt: you are an I, / you are an Elizabeth, / you are one
of them. / Why should you be one, too?”

The child continues with self-questioning that expands into the quandary of
how she can call herself an individual while also knowing that she is undeniably a
member of the species as well as a particular family:

Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?
What similarities--
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the National Geographic
and those awful hanging breasts--
held us all together
or made us all just one?
How –I didn’t know any
word for it—how “unlikely”… (Bishop 60)

In the end, the poem answers its own questions:

Then I was back in it.
The War was on. Outside,
in Worcester, Massachusetts,
were night and slush and cold,
and it was still the fifth
of February, 1918.  (Bishop 60)

The child brings herself back down to earth by reciting the concrete particulars of her own life. Here, Bishop’s poem illustrates how it is the unique experiences and facts of an individual life that create some kind of singularity we can call our own, and which, at the same time allow us a kind of stability we can not only live with, but live for. The child’s idea of herself and where she belongs in the world can be seen as ephemeral. These perceptions and assumptions about herself may change and morph over time, but in the end, these profound, life-changing realizations, are only thoughts, as ephemeral as air, that exist in a being who will eventually expire.

The poet Carl Dennis addresses another aspect of elusive self-definitions in his poem “A Chance for the Soul.” Here the narrator wonders if his own soul approves of the life he has chosen. As opposed to a figurative higher being in the sky keeping a tally on his life choices, the narrator addresses a being much closer to the self, but perhaps more mysterious and less definable:

Am I leading the life that my soul,
Mortal or not, wants me to lead is a question
That seems at least as meaningful as the question
Am I leading the life I want to live,
Given the vagueness of the pronoun “I”
The number of things it wants at any moment. (Dennis 30)

“Given the vagueness of the pronoun ‘I’ ” seems to me another way of asking “who am I?” at any given moment when that definition is not only fluid and flexible, but intangible. Am I this body and mind that I present to the world? Or am I more of my soul, and how in control of my soul am I really - especially when we consider that the idea of
one possessing a soul is yet another construct, as definable or indefinable as the idea of a self? The line also serves as a hint for the remainder of the poem as the narrator goes on to address his soul as not only a separate being, but as a wiser and more in control being whom he must ask for tolerance and patience. The closing stanza ends with this resolution:

“Be brave, Soul,” I want to say to encourage it.  
“Your student, however slow, is willing,  
The only student you’ll ever have.” (Dennis 31)

One might add that the student is the only creator the soul will ever have. The “I” in this poem and his construct of a soul may be presented as separate beings, but they could not be more dependent on each other to exist. As writer Julian Barnes points out in his philosophical memoir “Nothing To Be Frightened Of,” “We live as if the soul—or spirit, or individuality, or personality—were an identifiable and locatable entity rather than a story the brain tells itself” (Barnes 118).

Thus, the definitions of self that we assign to ourselves seem to be another form of the ephemeral. In fact, we could go so far as the say that these definitions of self are absent as they exist only as abstract perceptions that run through our mind which we then apply to our lives. These definitions change as our lives and perceptions change. We rationalize who we are at any given time or place for various reasons: a moment of self-realization and maturity (the little girl sees that she is at once a member of the human tribe as well as her own family and an individual all at the same time) and/or a sense of security (I have a soul, therefore I will go to heaven).
Section II: The Power of the Unsaid

Words, in the end, aspire towards speechlessness, towards something that cannot be said. - Rita Dove. (2007 Poet’s Forum)

In the chapter “Like Something Almost Being Said,” from his book *On Eloquence*, Denis Donoghue illustrates various ways in which eloquence presents itself in brevity, and, often, in something close to intimation or suggestion (70). Donoghue demonstrates this point with these lines from Seamus Heaney's poem “The Haw Lantern,” a poem about his mother’s death: “A soul ramifying and forever/ Silent, beyond silence listened for” (90). As Donohue points out, it is the word *beyond* that carries most of the weight in Heaney's lines. Without the poet directly telling us, the reader cannot help but think of the sounds of this world that are listened for, that we wait for with joy or trepidation, whether it is the voice of the beloved, a footstep approaching or a phone ringing. In the great *beyond* of death the waiting and the listening are over, for the dead as well as the living connected with that person. The lines from Heaney’s poem represent a prime example of something being said without fully being said. The poet has left intentional absences for the reader to render for herself. The writer must trust the human experience and intelligence of her readers to fill in the unsaid in a way that works best for them, but does not leave them in a no-man's land of foggy mystery.

Donoghue’s title for the chapter comes from the Philip Larkin poem “The Trees,” specifically from the lines “The trees are coming into leaf / like something almost being said” (70). Donoghue ends the chapter referring back to Larkin’s lines and explaining that, in a way, the lines are misleading. The leaves will, of course, eventually come into
bloom “but the something almost being said (in the poem) may never be said; it may stay
in the almost condition, as if tongue-tied” (Donoghue 98).

Larkin’s lines remind me of the closing lines from the Robert Hass poem “The
Problem of Describing Trees:” “Mountains, sky / The aspen doing something in the
wind” (Time and Material 110). In both poems, and in Donoghue’s chapter, the word
something substitutes for what cannot be said outright; words fail or are not adequate to
transmit an experience wholly, so it is the unsaid or almost-said that transcends the power
of the said. This idea is supported by poet Charles Simic when he asserts: “Poetry is the
orphan of silence. The words never quite equal the experience” (5).

The notion of words being inadequate is a topic John Koethe also explores in his
poem "A Pathetic Landscape." It appears that Koethe no longer believes the uttering of
words to be capable of rendering any kind of lasting truth. All significance for him has
been reduced to an unspeakable feeling:

...What
Is plain language anyway? Is it the one you think,
Or hear, or one that you imagine? Can it incorporate
The numinous as well as the particular, and the ways
Ideas move, and the aftertaste that conviction leaves
Once its strength has faded? I don't believe it anymore,
But I can hear it sighing in the wind, and feel it in the
Movement of the leaves outside my window..... (Koethe 44)

Koethe seems to feel that we ask too much of words, for, at best, they serve as a weak
attempt at imperfect communication. How mournful and frustrating to have lost one’s
faith in language and yet still feel the need for it resonating on a visceral level, to “hear it
sighing in the wind, / and feel it in the / Movement of the leaves outside my window”
(44). In some sense, I think what Koethe is getting at in these lines is also what Robert
Hass was writing of in “Meditations at Langunitas.” If we dissect language down to its core, it withers and becomes, at best, an elegy to what it signifies.

This notion of the unsaid or the almost-said leads me to more concrete examples of craft and technique. The first is from the unique voice of poet C.D. Wright in her poem “only the crossing counts” which appeared in Slate magazine:

It's not how we leave one's life. How go off the air. You never know do you. You think you're ready for anything; then it happens, and you're not. You're really not. The genesis of an ending, nothing but a feeling, a slow movement, the dusting of furniture with a remnant of the revenant's shirt. Seeing the candles sink in their sockets; we turn away, yet the music never quits. The fire kisses our face. O phthisis, o lotharian dead eye, no longer will you gaze on the baize of the billiard table. No more shooting butter dishes out of the sky. Scattering light. Between snatches of poetry and penitence you left the brumal wood of men and women. Snow drove the butterflies home. You must know how it goes, known all along what to expect, sooner or later … the faded cadence of anonymity.

Frankly, my dear, frankly, my dear, frankly Wright does not provide us with a period at the poem’s end, and this absence of punctuation is most effective as the reader is surely to conclude the line in her own mind with the famous declaration: “I don’t give a damn.” In this case, it is the words that are deliberately left out that make them all the more obvious. More importantly, Wright does not once mention the word death in this poem (though she comes close with “o lotharian dead eye”), and yet the poem is clearly about the denial of death, with the absence of the word making the unsaid subject all the more present. In this poem, we are also brought back to the concept of death being the great equalizer, the destroyer of individuality. Wright writes: “You must know / how it goes, known all along what to expect, / sooner
or later … the faded cadence of anonymity.” As with the earlier example from Elizabeth Bishop, we are shown again how the great equalizer of death overturns the idea that you can remain anonymous in any way. You will eventually join the mortal troop via our strongest shared characteristic; we all come to an end. Of course, while we are living we must not “give a damn” about death in order to carry on and lead any kind of fulfilling life _even if you chose to live your life “shooting butter dishes out of the sky.”

In his poem “Basic Dialogue,” Charles Wright also utilizes the technique of inserting the beginning lines of a famous quote and allowing the reader to finish it for herself. However, in this instance, it is much more subtle:

Self-oblivion, sacred information, God’s nudge —
I think I’ll piddle around by the lemon tree, thorns
Sharp as angel’s teeth.

I think
I’ll lie down in the dandelions, the purple and white violets.
I think I’ll keep lying there, one eye cocked towards heaven. (Wright 5)

In line four, Wright comes close to quoting Descartes with the open-ended statement and broken line: “I think.” One can’t help but hear the echoed conclusion of “therefore, I am.” Charles Wright’s poems often move between the personal internal world of thought to the exterior of the natural world as close as his own backyard. Here, he expresses how we live in two worlds, the private constructs of our own minds and the public external world we share with others, and all the while aware of “God’s nudge,” so we keep “one eye cocked towards heaven.”

In both examples, I believe the poet’s choice to leave the well-known quotes in their almost-said state is used not only as technique to further absorb the reader but to leave open space for reverberations, for the ghost of an idea to resonate.
In a sense, the reader is taken off the page and allowed another layer of engagement. As in C.D. Wright’s poem above, Larry Levis also writes of death without stating the word outright. In his sixty-two line allegorical poem “Adolescence,” Levis shifts the narrative in time, place and character several times, repeatedly using elements of nature as a metaphor for birth, youth, the passing of time, and finally, death, all of which might be referred to as the circle of life. The opening stanza introduces us to the topic of youth and death via images that toggle back and forth between the two:

Our babysitter lives across from the Dodge street cemetery,
And behind her broad, untroubled face,
Her teenage sons play touch football all afternoon
Among the graves of clerks & Norwegian settlers.
At night, these huge trees, rooted in such quiet
Arch over the tombstones as if in exultation,
As if they inhaled starlight.
Their limbs reach
Towards each other & their roots must touch the dead. (Levis 83)

In breaking down each line above, we can reveal the images Levis chooses to convey—birth, youth, the passing of time and death—without actually using those particular words. In line one, for example, “babysitter” stands in for birth and youth where “cemetery” represents death. In line three, “teenage sons” again represent youth and “all afternoon,” the passing of time. In line four, “among the graves” equals death while “Norwegian settlers” refers to a historical passing of time in a physical place. Line five gives us “these huge trees, rooted in such quiet,” to remind us again of life and the passing of time. Line six uses “tombstones” for death and “exaltation” for life. Lines seven, eight and nine complete the cycle with the images of inhaling, as one might take in breath, the limbs reaching towards each other as a living tree does, but also as humans do in a demonstration of affection, and finally ending with the image of death in line nine.
with “their roots must touch the dead.” I believe Levis also used the image of the tree limbs reaching towards each other and their roots touching the dead to make the reader visualize a circle, as in the circle or cycle of life.

Again, in the following five lines from “Adolescence,” Levis uses the images of life and death in a toggle-like fashion. He imagines himself and his young friend who has since died riding horses:

And if, later, we had let them
Graze at their leisure on the small tufts of spring grass
In those woods, & if the disintegrating print of the ferns
Had been a lullaby there against the dry stones & the trunks
Of fallen trees, then maybe nothing would have happened…. (Levis 83)

With the image “small tufts of spring grass,” we are reminded of youth with the season of spring and the beginning of new life; we are then taken back to the image of death with the lines “the disintegrating print of the ferns,” and yet again, we are drawn back in the very next line to youth with the one mention of the word “lullaby” immediately followed by “the dry stones & the trunks /Of fallen trees,” which brings us directly back to the image of death and the passing of time. This concentrated switchback use of imagery makes stating the words “life” or “death” unnecessary and far more engaging and moving in the form of a narrative.

In this same poem, Levis makes use of another technique that represents the almost-said by effectively using the ellipsis in a few instances to not only create a sense of suspense for the reader, but to assist in the shift of narrative and to create a physical and emotional pause as well as to leave room for the reader to fill in the blanks beyond the boundaries of the given narrative. One can’t help but wonder what the ellipsis is
filling in for. What word or string of words could the narrator not bring himself to say?

For example in the following lines:

Finally,
In Laredo, Texas, someone anonymous, & too late, bought her
A bus ticket back….
Her father, a gambler & horse dealer, wept
Openly the day she was buried. (Levis 83)

The next line after the ellipsis changes the reader’s focus to the father’s reaction at his daughter’s funeral. Was the bus ticket back to a life she could not bear? Or to the home she longed to return to? The ellipsis leaves this unsaid conclusion up to the reader. It also serves to illustrate how life rarely plays itself out in tidy endings. Levis again uses the ellipsis in the same poem with “then maybe nothing would have happened…,” and “If he had time to think…,” and again with “when it slipped into the river today…” In these examples, an ellipsis is not only a stand-in for the unsaid, but, I believe, a symbol of implied hope for what could have been, a visual cue heavy with regret for the unsaid and the undone, a kind of stuttering stop before words which are too painful to articulate. In this particular poem, the ellipsis may have also been used to illustrate the way memory works, how thoughts are recalled in stunted images, a cautious placement of puzzle pieces that are never quite complete. Let it never be said that the effective use of punctuation cannot provide powerful emotional resonance.

In fact, in some instances, I would say that a complete lack of punctuation is yet another form of the almost-said. In her 2002 poem “Key Episodes From An Earthly Life,” C.D. Wright uses no punctuation what-so-ever. This kind of absence leaves the reader in the position of finding the pauses in narrative and breath, as well as the stresses in meaning. Part of the engagement in reading this kind of poem is in locating or creating
the curves in the road for oneself. The reading becomes much more interactive, almost immediately calling for the poem to be read again:

Key Episodes From An Earthly Life

Those dark Arkansas roads that is the sound
I am after the choiring of crickets

Around this time of year especially evening
I love everything I sold enough eggs

To buy a new dress I watched him drink the juice
of our beets And render the light liquid

I came to talk you into physical splendor
I do not wish to speak to your machine (Steal Away 171)

The first impression that struck me about this poem was that it is written in unpunctuated couplets. I believe this technique not only assists the reader’s eye with filling in the unseen punctuation and pacing, but at the same time leaves the options regarding pauses, full stops, and the logic of the narrative’s syntax up for some personal interpretation. For example, in the first couplet, it appears to me that Wright intended “that is the sound / I am after” to apply to the first four words in line one as well as the last three words of line two. The narrator could be after the earthly sounds of both “Those dark Arkansas roads” and “the choiring of crickets / Around this time of year especially evening / I love everything.” However, it could also be read that the narrator loves everything around this time of year “especially evening.” Wright provides the reader with some clues as to pauses and full stops, as in the opening line of couplet two with the capitol A of “Around this time of year.” One can assume a period after “crickets” in line two and a comma implied after “year,” and “evening” in line three. Having read the poem several times I find I can play around with the velocity and narrative of the piece to some
extent. Although the end of the poem provides no period, the declarative statement (“I do not wish to speak to your machine”) pretty much puts the brakes on the piece by asserting what the narrator does not wish to do. In the end, what appears most important is that Wright conveyed the atmosphere of the piece very effectively, regardless of how an individual reader might interpret each line of the speaker’s story.

Another example of the scarcity of punctuation adding layers of meaning can be found in Frank O’Hara’s three stanza, thirty-four line poem entitled “Personal Poem.” This piece contains exactly three commas (if one does not count the two in “8,000,000”), and a complete lack of periods:

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Now when I walk around at lunchtime
I have only two charms in my pocket
an old Roman coin Mike Kanemitsu gave me
and a bolt-head that broke off a packing case
when I was in Madrid the others never
brought me too much luck though they did
help keep me in New York against coercion
but now I'm happy for a time and interested

I walk through the luminous humidity
passing the House of Seagram with its wet
and its loungers and the construction to
the left that closed the sidewalk if
I ever get to be a construction worker
I'd like to have a silver hat please
and get to Moriarty's where I wait for
LeRoi and hear who wants to be a mover and shaker the last five years my batting average is .016 that's that, and LeRoi comes in and tells me Miles Davis was clubbed 12 times last night outside BIRDLAND by a cop a lady asks us for a nickel for a terrible disease but we don't give her one we don't like terrible diseases, then

we go eat some fish and some ale it's cool but crowded we don't like Lionel Trilling we decide, we like Don Allen we don't like
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Henry James so much we like Herman Melville
we don't want to be in the poets' walk in
San Francisco even we just want to be rich
and walk on girders in our silver hats
I wonder if one person out of the 8,000,000 is
thinking of me as I shake hands with LeRoi
and buy a strap for my wristwatch and go
back to work happy at the thought possibly so  (O’ Hara 32)

As in C.D. Wright’s poem, O’Hara uses the white space between stanzas to give us some
idea of pacing and full stops, not to mention the opportunity to take a breath. A period is
implied after “interested” at the end of the first stanza for example. But in this poem, the
separation between action and thought is much more fluid, as a pair of feet moving
briskly down the concrete line of a city block becomes a blur, the thoughts of the narrator
and actions around him run one into the other. But what does the almost complete lack of
punctuation tell us in this poem? In this case, it appears that it affects the pace of the
poem the most. From the descriptive words, we can tell that the narrator is walking down
the street and these are the thoughts and actions happening in him and around him. But
the velocity created by the lack of punctuation, especially periods, gives us the heartbeat
of the poem. The pace and the pulse of the piece lie in what is not present, in what is not
stopping us from forging ahead to the next line, the next block, and the next thought. For
me, this lack of punctuation is also reflective of thought patterns, as we do not think in
complete sentences properly punctuated. Once again, the most obvious and effective
omission here is the lack of a period at the poem’s end. It seems that O’Hara does not
want us to stop. His narrator may have gone back to work, but the city outside continues
to pulsate and the blocks are endless, as are the whirling thoughts in our own heads. One
can’t help but wonder how much of the atmosphere of the piece would have been lost had
O’Hara fully employed punctuation. Clearly, there is much to be implied in the strategic use or non-use of punctuation. There is much to be had for the reader in what was purposely left out.

Section IV: The Transient Experience

A strong representation of the ephemeral moment occurs in the following excerpt from the Wallace Stevens poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird:”

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after. (Stevens 93)

In the reverential silence after the blackbird’s whistle, we are left to recreate the music for ourselves, to re-live the moment of rapture. Our imaginations augment the past experience that occurred in the physical world. In fact, in many ways the experience is more ours now that it is a memory, a private film to view and embellish over time. Stevens’ line also tells us that our perceived control over so called reality—in this case, the spontaneous, heightened event of the blackbird whistling in the material world—is something that we have far less control over than the memory, the “just after” created by the experience. One could say that any kind of perceived control over our own present reality is a falsehood, another construct. Further, one might conclude that the event of the blackbird whistling exists now only in the form of memory, a thought, and as stated earlier, we are a culmination of our memories, a continuum from what was.

Since the act of reflection is composed of thoughts, I believe it is accurate to say that memories are ephemeral; they do not exist in the physical world and live only as long
as the barer of those memories lives. If, as John Koethke’s states, we are the sum of our illusions, then it stands to reason that we are also the sum of our memories. Perhaps they are one and the same.

Although not considered a modern poet, Emily Bronte reiterates this idea of memory augmenting or transcending the actual experience in her poem “All Hushed and Still within the House:

All hushed and still within the house;
Without – all wind and driving rain;
But something whispers to my mind,
Through rain and through the wailing wind.
Never again.
Never again? Why not again?
Memory has power as real as wind. (Bronte 308)

If “memory has power as real as wind,” then surely we own the experience of the wind and rain in its continued state of remembrance as steadfastly as we felt the impact of the actual experience. The possession of the memory in the “just after” is perhaps now more sacred and private a thing than the original event.

In the Larry Levis poem “Elegy with a Thimble Full of Water in a Cage,” we are again shown the transient nature of experience and memory. In this poem, the reader is with the narrator in his current state of reverie and in the details of his untouchable memories. The very opening line of the poem makes this clear: “It’s a list of what I cannot touch.” Here, Levis ingeniously combines the narrator’s present day state of mind with that of the mythological character of Sybil, as we are taken into the narrator’s memories and back again. We are with Sybil in her cage, in her aging and receding body, and in her wish to die. The sympathy evoked by Sybil’s story reflects back on the poet and the reader as we are all diminishing daily, our lives getting smaller and smaller. The
entire first section of the poem envelops us in the images of that which is old and aging
and well on its way to disappearing, from “the abandoned labor camp south of Piedra.”
to:

the oldest trees, in that part of Paris with a name I forget,
Propped up with sticks to keep their limbs from cracking,
And such quiet, a women with a cane,
And knowing, if I came back, I could not find them again. (Levis 197)

With highly detailed imagery and the use of words like “abandoned,” “forget,” “quiet,”
and “cracking,” Levis masterfully illustrates how all moments are happening and
disintegrating at the same time.

We relish and simultaneously mourn them for their transient nature. That they are
held in the stasis of memory seems to be our only ethereal link to that which is now
untouchable. With lines like “a cat I remember” and “The small rural post office
growing smaller, then lost, tucked / into the shoreline of the lake when I looked back”
and “County music from a lone radio” (197), Levis continues to keep us focused on that
which is gone or disappearing. The references to things remembered or slowly
disappearing as one drives past them, as well as a “lone’ radio instead of simply a radio,
and even the very last word of the poem (“irretrievable”), all work together to create the
on-going disintegrating atmosphere of the poem and the stories being told.

No matter how ephemeral a memory may be, it often seems that if we are defined
by anything, we are defined by our past, our individual memories. And what are
memories but the firing of neurons? Synaptic dramas replayed in the mind. This
materialist epiphany that hopefully all self-reflective individuals realize at some
point reveals that individualism, if it exists at all, exists in our life experiences that
ultimately lead to universally understood deductions, lessons about life and being
human. In the human bodies we are born into, we are all one among the many, a biological entity with a beginning and an end; however, while living we evade complete assimilation through our unique individual experiences.

Conclusion: No Joy Without Its Opposite

If, as Wallace Stevens writes “death is the mother of beauty,” (66) and as Charles Wright states “all beauty depends upon disappearance,” (67) then surely we need and are wholly dependent on the very idea of absence, the possibility of an absolute void lending meaning to everything that isn’t. It seems that one cannot achieve a sense of fulfillment without at least the notion of its opposite.

Poet Rebecca McClanahan reiterates this in her poem “The Invention of Zero.” The physical appearance of the poem on the page leads the reader immediately into the idea of absence, the visual caesurae that form the double white spaces between unpunctuated long-lined tercets showcasing the realm of empty space, i.e. zero, or a void that asserts its presence on the page. The poem seems to be asking if zero is ever truly equal to nothing. Something always seems to be there for us to ponder, even if we call it nothingness. Here, McClanahan also experiments with punctuation to enhance the poem’s central theme. In this case, once again a complete lack of punctuation reflects back on the infinite on-going nature of numbers and accentuating the poem’s atmosphere of emptiness as viewed through the construct of zero. Although the poem is one that is not strongly a narrative based in a single story, it is the story of loss, of coming to terms with the universal ending to our individual stories and knowing that, without the concept of zero, no accomplishment in life holds any meaning. The poem opens with the following stanza:
All along we knew something was missing. We had no idea it was nothing. We knew only what we lacked, a place to place the sum of our subtractions (McClanahan 141)

“All along we knew something was missing.” Is McClanahan stating that we may be born with an inherent sense of loss? Is this what keeps us moving forward every day? Is this what leads some of us to the idea of a god? Can God provide us with “a place to place the sum of our subtractions?”

Later in the poem, McClanahan seems to tell us to get used to it, for zero always equals zero, but what a bonus in that this bottom-line truth only serves to make all things equal:

Origin Original Indivisible Irreducible Wholly itself Wholly nothing all things being equal And they are all the great and countable things unaccountable (McClanahan 141)

And in what seems to be the penultimate meaning of the poem, she writes:

Anything times zero erases itself and it’s all the same To Zero expandable halo lasso noose asking nothing of us taking nothing from us cannot divide us can only multiply all our somethings into nothing (McClanahan 142)

Zero, in a sense, is our imaginary friend, our construct; it does not arrive in our imaginations without our consent and holds no power over us that we do not give it. Make yourself a lasso and seize the day or make a noose and end it all; it’s up to the individual on how one chooses to deal with the reality of our lives ending; either way, zero is the end result.
I agree with Billy Collins when he said: “There’s one subject in lyric poetry, and that is that you have this existence and at the end of it you’re going to experience non-existence” (O’Driscoll 301). In the end, every living thing occupies two forms, that of life and that of death; the switch is either on or off. Since we cannot ever truly know the off state from a first person point of view, I believe we explore the various states of absence and the ephemeral in our many expressions of art, in the depth of our relationships with others, in activities that we believe may cheat death, such as mountain climbing and sky diving, our attempts at fame, as well as in our fantasies, dreams and nightmares. We play at absence perhaps to get to know it as best we can before we meet it face-to-face.

Representations of absence and the ephemeral walk beside us daily; they are there to notice or ignore. The recognition of each can give our lives immense meaning and conversely sink us into the depths of depression.

Poetry that gives a nod to absence and the ephemeral and its ironically ever-present presence in our lives never fails to leave me in a state of wonder about the many significant, confusing and sometimes tragic components that make up a human life. As a reader and as a poet, this kind of poetry leaves me with a deep endearment towards my own species for continuing on in the face of all those elements.
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