

# The poetic elegies that can help us make space for our pandemic grief

Elegy performs an essential caretaking, both intimate and public, of our dead.

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Today at 6:00 a.m. EST



The grinding work of pandemic survival leaves few moments to reckon with the significance of our catastrophic losses. The scale of death from the coronavirus — 5.4 million, more than 800,000 of them in the United States, and counting — baffles understanding and eclipses feeling. But a society survives such devastation only by creating shared spaces and open time for mourning. How do we begin to acknowledge so many dead? What cultural forms and expressive practices can bear these absent lives with us into the future?

Elegy is where we figure out how to do this work. Elegiac poetry helps us hold vigil over the dying and bear the dead to a resting place. The form has long offered symbolic versions of these defining human acts, surrogate ways to fulfill existential obligations when we are rendered passive and mute by another's death. Whitman's "[When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd](#)," shared in so many classrooms and anthologies, still resonates for the way the poet risks the unanswerable questions at the jagged heart of elegy: "O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved? / And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone?"

Whitman wrote these lines for a slain president and a nation devastated by civil war. In a pandemic, when a flood of statistics threatens to swallow the singularity of every death, contemporary elegies — about the dead, for the dead, in place of the dead — offer us new ways for our grief to work its way past silence. Elegy performs an essential caretaking, both intimate and public, of our dead. Poetry is a labor of survival.

At the beginning of the pandemic, our most established mortuary and memorial practices were in lockdown. Funerals were forbidden and mourners had no way to gather in person, as farewell rituals collapsed into screens. The anguished poetry of that moment tried to work through this dreadful impasse. Nick Laird's "[Up Late](#)," an elegy to his father, who died of covid-19, describes the sudden, otherworldly alienation of pandemic dying: "This morning / the consultant said your father now is clawing / at the mask and is exhausted and we've thrown / everything we have at this. It's a terrible disease. ... // Dad, / you poor bastard, I see you. / You lay like that for a week alone / with your thoughts in the room. // Tethered. Breathless. undefended. / At sea as on an ice floe / slipping down into the shipping channels." As touch is impossible, Laird labors to make sure his father is seen and his death de-sequestered. The poem struggles with how to be present from a distance, how to witness the ravages of the pandemic from the inside out. In this final gift of elegy, his father is isolated, but not alone, as he drifts into death's cold waters.

In recent seasons, many have tried to acknowledge the pandemic dead in inventive memorial forms: empty chairs in [D.C.](#) and [Tennessee](#); flags in [Austin](#) and on the [National Mall](#); prayer flags and [cairns](#) and [quilts](#) in Massachusetts; origami cranes in Los Angeles; and freshly planted groves of native trees in Ohio. But where memorials, however

elegantly conceived and assembled, function only in situ, elegy offers an alternative: a text that is easy to access, reproduce, circulate and share. Whether spoken or written, elegy leverages that most intimate, visceral and spontaneous mechanism of expression: the human voice.

Contemporary elegy, like love poetry, seeks to tell something very old and repetitive — *I miss you, where are you, why were you lost among so many spared* — without cliché. Each death uniquely rends our shared world; the shock of innovative elegiac form captures the specific incompleteness of being in the wake of another's death, telling how *this* death and *this* grief matter. "In the night I brush / my teeth with a razor": This distich — an old elegiac form renovated here by Kevin Young — is the entirety of his poem "Grief." It jolts us awake to confront a terrible void by coupling daily routine with violence. Just as a blade might threaten the nerves protected within teeth, his image cuts through familiar language to expose raw grief. In the same volume, "Book of Hours," we come to the oddly musical line: "I wish to wash / my face in the furnace." Such soothing alliteration and assonance, laid out in iambic pentameter, delivers us without warning to the terrifying catharsis of a cleansing by fire. Where elegy wounds in image and sound and figurative device, it also houses the impossible strangeness of grief so that we survive it.

Many poets use elegy to tell the dead about their own passing, as if they might help us make sense of their absence and our own, now uncanny, survival. "I was asleep while you were dying. / It's as if you slipped through some rift, a hollow / I make between my slumber and my waking," Natasha Trethewey explains to her dead mother in "Myth." Trethewey addresses her mother directly, seeks to summon her with just the right images, rhythms, and pitches of longing. For a moment we meet in a fertile borderland between being and nonbeing, or a time zone between *is* and *was*. We inhabit this space alongside the poet; elegy is a practice of addressing the dead so that others can overhear. Trethewey's address to her mother is also to us, and eventually to herself, in a circuit that offers company for grief's isolation.

Elegy, like other commemorative practices, often strains between individual and collective voice amid widespread trauma and social crisis. Mass death requires a different language to grapple with loss, fracturing traditional elegy as poets seek to chronicle many interrupted lives. Kim Hyesoon's astonishing book "Autobiography of Death," translated by Don Mee Choi, responds to the April 2014 Sewol ferry disaster, in which hundreds of schoolchildren drowned off the coast of South Korea in view of a horrified nation. Hyesoon hallucinates impossible rites of commemoration: "a four-ton bronze bell with a thousand names of the dead engraved on it dangles from the helicopter / The helicopter flies over a tall mountain to hang the bell at a temple hidden deep in the mountains," or "A thousand masks float on the thousand rivers of the north, south, east, west."

In these poems, the 304 people killed in the disaster become thousands of names, masks, and rivers because their loss is incalculable, beyond account. Each death, for Hyesoon, is multiplied by injustice and official negligence so that it becomes many deaths, intolerable and beyond repair. Her imagination inscribes the sky, water and land with their absence, remaking and remapping the world in their wake. Her poetry teaches us about the combination of imagination and courage we need to create commemorative spaces for the millions who have died, and are dying, of covid.

Elegy modulates collective anguish into form and meaning. In "The Man with Night Sweats," poems written in response to the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, Thom Gunn imagines lives vanishing on a wide scale, and in intricate entanglement: "Contact of friend led to another friend, / Supple entwinement through the living mass / Which for all that I knew might have no end, / Image of an unlimited embrace." For Gunn, the living mass names our basic existential solidarity the far-reaching interdependence of human lives

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“The Missing” goes on to explore a sense of mutual implication in others’ illness, a shared exposure that speaks clearly to the present: “But death — Their deaths have left me less defined: / It was their pulsing presence made me clear. / I borrowed from it, I was unconfined, / Who tonight balance unsupported here.” Gunn searches an ambiguity in survival, because every survival is temporary. It is hard to ignore, against these measured verses, the pressure of the shadow-word “uncoffined” for “unconfined,” as if the speaker has returned from his own burial to speak here also for himself. In a posthumous undertone, Gunn speaks *with* the dead. Elegiac language is a territory that the living and dead inhabit together. Four decades later, we need to reclaim this lyric territory.

Elegy does not change the fact of death. It is just poetry, as frail as the breath that utters it and a confirmation of our own precarity. As Joy Harjo tells us in “Death Is a Woman,” “I have nothing to prove your fierce life, except paper / that turns back to dust.” But somehow we are stronger in both knowing that the terms of death are nonnegotiable and still insisting, on the page and in our voice, on negotiation. The mind imagines tactics; the voice tries out its claims. This work is ours to do. Poetry helps us gather the remains of the dead, even across great distance, and offer them a place. Elegy makes our dead, sheltered from the weather, sound.

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