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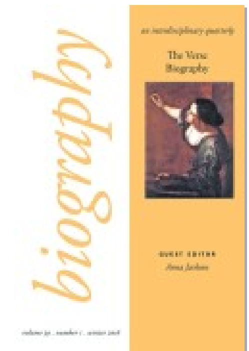

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"TALK (WHY?) WITH MUTE ASH": ANNE CARSON'S *NOX* AS THERAPEUTIC BIOGRAPHY

JOAN FLEMING

INTRODUCTION

In 2000, Anne Carson got a phone call out of the blue from her estranged brother Michael. This was the first time they had spoken in years, and Carson booked a ticket to travel to Copenhagen to visit him. Just days before she was due to fly, she got a phone call from Michael's widow, to tell her that he had unexpectedly died in the weeks prior. Carson had not only lost the chance to see her older brother, she also missed his funeral. Circumstance denied her the opportunity of both connection and ritual closure.

Carson then constructed a notebook of memories, artifacts, photographs, and poetry, as a grief-work for her lost brother, and a meditation on the shape of absence itself. This notebook became *Nox*: an art-book that is at once an elegy, a translation, a textual object, and a therapeutic biography. Carson reworks the fragments of Michael's life—she translates them, if you will—in an ultimately failed attempt to understand her brother's life. Her approach is to study and interpret the slight evidence of Michael's psyche as if she were translating the papyrus fragments of Stesichoros or Sappho. While deeply personal, her method of therapeutic biography in *Nox* echoes her approach to writing a life in signature poems like "The Glass Essay" (part-poetic biography of Emily Brontë) and *Autobiography of Red*. Carson's auto/biographical impulse, throughout her body of work, results in fragments of biography blended with fragments of literary analysis, philosophy or theology, invention, and confessional verse. Carson folds in raw particles of knowledge—what John D'Agata calls "the facts"—but these work to illuminate the complex and ultimately unknowable psychology of both subject and speaker. The textual, material,

and imagistic strategies of *Nox* bring "the broad daylight" (1.0) of the search for understanding into complex relation with mystery and lament.

In this essay, I recruit English scholar and psychoanalyst Adam Phillips's emphasis on the value of fresh questions over definitive answers to illuminate *Nox* as a work of therapeutic biography. Then by analyzing Carson's characteristically experimental translation of Catullus's poem 101, I show how the text and the materiality of *Nox* keep Michael present in a kind of limbo space: alive in memory, though darkly so, and never quite released into the next world. *Nox* as therapeutic biography sets into motion silences, blanks, and unanswerable questions, in an ultimately hopeful process of grief-work and psychic renewal.

* * * * *

In *Nox*, Carson invokes psychoanalytic approaches to analyze both herself and her absent brother. Her practice is in sympathy with Adam Phillips's provocative challenge to the contemporary discipline of psychoanalysis, in privileging the suggestive over the prescriptive. Phillips equates psychoanalysis with multiplicious and suggestive methods of translation. He argues that while psychoanalysts do not tend to think of themselves as "translating people," the analyst's work of interpreting, reconstructing, questioning, and re-describing is remarkably like the work of a translator (129). He writes that people come for psychoanalysis "when they are in need of translation; to move or be moved from one place to another, through language" (130). When people reach "the limits of their language" (130), psychoanalysis can be a means of finding fresh descriptions, new questions, and a better vocabulary for pain.

Nox combines Carson's characteristically experimental translation choices with a therapeutic delving into grief for a family member who was lost long before he died. Carson performs the work of reconstruction and redescription in an attempt to find a "better vocabulary" for the pain of mourning. *Nox*—which means "night" in Latin—is an unusual book with an unusual form. It is published not as a codex, but as a concertinaed scroll of folded pages, packaged into a hard oyster-box casing. Once the lid of the box is raised, the contents can be lifted out like a long paper accordion. While the book can be read similarly to a codex, with the regular folds forming a sense of left- and right-hand pages, the book is actually one continuous page. All the text and imagery faces the reader, and a long continuous blank page forms the underside.

Throughout the course of *Nox*'s "unfolding," we learn that Carson's brother Michael disappeared in 1978, escaping Canada and police prosecution to wander, sometimes destitute, in Europe and India for many years. We are not told what Michael was wanted for, but we do learn that he had dealt in drugs,

that he married twice (at least), and that he loved a young woman named Anna who died young and who mattered more to him than either of his wives. Michael clearly led a difficult life on the margins of society, and his estrangement from the family is tacitly tragic. In *Nox*, Carson works to uncover a less painful version of Michael's painfully mysterious life, while insisting on the impossibility of interpreting his life with any authority or finality.

The scrapbooked evidence of Michael's life consists of the one letter he wrote home to his mother in his twenty years of absence, plus fractured black-and-white photographs from a box Carson retrieved from Copenhagen after his death. These pieces of evidence are torn up, sketched on or written over, and then collaged onto the book's right-hand folds, along with quotations from Herodotus's *Histories*, meditations on Carson's family history, a copy of the widow's elegy, transcriptions of phone conversations Carson had with her brother during his absence (sometimes one-sided), scrawled pencil reprises, paint daubs, and scraps of lyric. The way this evidence is presented in *Nox*—in fragments—echoes the texts that Carson works with in her capacity as a scholar and translator: the papyrus fragments of Sappho, Stesichoros, and others, all of which require translation, and all of which demand a decision to either fill in the blanks or allow the blanks to remain.

In *Nox*, Carson employs textual, imagistic, and material strategies to convey a key tension: the tension between seeking to understand a life, and the realization that full clarity is impossible. This is a tension between conclusiveness and process—what Richard Armstrong characterizes as an "internal vacillation" between history as *res gestae*, "an objective record of facts and deeds done," and as *res digestae*, "a digested, evolving narrative serving present needs and mapped exclusively from the present horizon" (132). *Nox* is the embodiment of a need to make something, to create something tangible and concrete, out of the atmospheric oppression of the grief mindset. While Carson's grief-work seeks footholds in facts, in the "objective record" of the history of a life, the result is a project rooted in therapeutic necessity and personal need. *Nox* emphasizes not a definitive interpretation of Michael, not a "final narrative," but rather, "an on-going project of narrative renewal" (132).

In the terms of psychoanalysis, Michael is a particularly mysterious case study. The sad paucity of facts about his life is compelling and heartbreaking for both writer and reader. However, there is a red thread that runs through all of Carson's work, which suggests all lives are fundamentally opaque, their motivations mysterious even to those who live them. Carson's radical acts of translation and poetry do not bleach away the mystery of her biographical subjects. Through postmodern habits of pastiche and fragmentation, and in line with her philosophical preoccupation with opacity, Carson works to give the mystery a compelling shape.

Carson's translation of the Roman poet Catullus's elegy for his brother in the poem 101 is a conspicuous vehicle for these tensions. Initially, the translation takes the form of lexical entries of each of the poem's Latin words. These are subtly doctored by Carson, and pasted onto the book's left-hand folds. For example, the gloss of the first Latin word of the Catullus poem, *multas*, includes the shades of definitions one would expect in a dictionary entry—"numerous, many, many of, many a . . . many things, much, to a great extent"—along with applications that are obviously charged with the book's themes of loss and anxiety, such as:

> *multa dies* or
> *multa lux*: broad daylight, *multa nox*: late
> in the night, perhaps too late. (1.0)[1]

In this primary lexical entry, I read the "broad daylight" of total understanding as sharing definitional space with the lament of "too late." The competing drives of elegy and insight, knowing and letting go, are framed within an "entry" of (and into) *multas,* the many, the multiplicious. Carson's Greek and Roman models of history and elegy serve to multiply and animate the questions of her brother's life. There is no definitive cure for grief, only better questions. Adam Phillips emphasizes the function of questions over answers in psychoanalytic work. The emphasis Phillips places on questions is in sympathy with Carson's approach to translating the life of her brother:

> When people want to know what the questions are that their lives seem to be answering; when people want to find out which questions about themselves can be answered, and which predicaments cannot usefully be formulated as questions; when people need a new question to ask of themselves; then it may be worth their while to go and see a psychoanalyst. If they are more interested in answers than in the trouble with answers, their time and money will probably be better spent elsewhere. (178)

Carson's therapeutic biography of her brother sets "the trouble with answers" productively in motion. The resistance that the bare, few facts of Michael's life sets up to securing conclusive insight feeds into larger questions about how to write a life. "I wanted to fill my elegy with all kinds of light," Carson writes at the very beginning of *Nox*, "but death makes us stingy. There is nothing more to be expended on that, we think, he's dead. Love cannot alter it. Words cannot add to it. No matter how I try to evoke the starry lad he was, it remains a plain odd history. So I began to think about history" (1.0). Here Carson suggests that her early attempts to write her brother's life only collapsed him down into a stingy darkness. The light comes when she resists this collapsing motion by mobilizing her elegy to ask questions about the very nature of history and biography itself.

* * * * *

The question of how to mourn a brother, of how to process grief, is what occupies both *Nox* and Catullus's 101. Carson's choices in translating the Catullus poem blur the boundaries between the living and the dead, and suggest the insufficiency of the funeral rite. These strategies insist on her grief-work as processual and ongoing. There is no definitive cure.

Indeed, Carson's full translation of Catullus's elegy only appears three-quarters of the way through *Nox*, after the reader has already passed through many, many versions of each of the poem's words. I quote the full poem here:

> I arrive at these poor, brother, burials
> so I could give you the last gift owed to death
> and talk (why?) with mute ash.
> Now that Fortune tore you from me, you
> oh poor (wrongly) brother (wrongly) taken from me,
> now still anyway this—what a distant mood of parents
> handed down as the sad gift for burials—
> accept! Soaked with tears of a brother
> and into forever, brother, farewell and farewell. (7.2)

By Anne Carson, from *Nox*, copyright © 2010 by Anne Carson. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

The final words of Catullus's poem, "ave atque vale," were traditionally spoken at the closing of a Roman funerary rite (Feldherr), and it is possible that the poem was performed at the actual funeral for Catullus's brother. However, the tone and diction of the poem, which Carson describes in charged paradox as a "sorrowful . . . festivity," conveys a sense of the funeral gesture as inadequate. In Carson's translation, "poor . . . burials" and "sad gift for burials" clearly registers this sense of woeful inadequacy. The standard translation for "ave atque vale" is "hail and farewell," a translation so common that J. Kates assumes it to be "already stuck in almost every reader's brain almost to the point of cliché." Instead, Carson translates the famous last phrase as "farewell and farewell," a repetitive form that performs a tension between finality—the double assertion of "farewell" implying a sense of final goodbye—and a suggestion of the valediction continuing "into forever": "farewell and farewell (and farewell and farewell . . .)." There is a sense in Carson's translation that the act of farewelling the dead can perhaps never be *done*, that grief can never, perhaps, be purged. This sense of unceasing therapeutic process is carried right through the material and textual performances of *Nox*. A pasted scrap toward the end reads, "And then there's the funeral feast or *saekken* afterwards" (10.3). On the following page, opposite the entry for *vale*, "farewell," is another scrap, which reads, "He

refuses, he is in the stairwell, he disappears." The brother refuses the definitive ritual send-off. He resists the closing of the rite.

Just as *Nox* functions as an epitaph for Carson's brother—with its hard box casing as closed as a coffin, and its repeated gestures of farewell and farewell—the text and the materiality of *Nox*'s form blur the boundary between keeping Michael alive in memory and releasing him into the next world. Andrew Feldherr argues that Catullus's own elegy for his brother performs a similar confusion of boundaries. The structure of the Roman funeral, Feldherr writes, enacted the creation and the dissolution of boundaries. The event of a death set the family of the deceased apart from the rest of society, a boundary most obviously marked by the donning of black mourning robes to signify the family's contamination by death. The funeral rite dispatched the corpse, both physically and metaphysically, into the world of the dead, a space absolutely separated from the world of the living. It also marked the reintegration of the family into the normal social sphere, thus dissolving the boundary between the mourners and their society.

Catullus's poem 101 mirrors the structure of the Roman funeral rite. Feldherr argues that "the poem's elaborate ten-line structure . . . moves from the isolation of the mourner, contaminated by death, to the final separation from the dead that returns the speaking poet to the world of the living" (215). Feldherr's reading, however, complicates the clear marking of these boundaries. He shows how the poem confuses the therapeutic final separation of the living from the dead. He points out that the word "brother" ("frater" in Latin), which is repeated four times throughout the poem, is "inherently reflexive," unlike other terms for family relationships (like father and son) (217). The "brother" of the second-to-last line creates a confusion of identity, as the invocation of the deceased is turned back on the speaker of the invocation. Feldherr notes that *nequiquam* ("in vain") from the line "et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem," which Carson translates as "and talk (why?) with mute ash," asserts the "inaccessibility of the very brother whom Catullus addresses" (216), even as the address continues. This address reinforces a tension "between figuring the dead as cut off from the living and as present to them" (216).

Similarly, while *Nox* laments the author's separation from her brother, its unusual form (one long connected page) suggests continuity across borders. Carson echoes the original Latin poem's sense of continuity between siblings. Her active, therapeutic investigation of her brother's life (on the facing side of *Nox*) is continuous with her brother's muteness (the long white page on the back). An evocation of the single connected page of *Nox* can be found in the entry for *perpetuum* from the poem's last line, "atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale," which is glossed in the *Nox* lexical entry as "having an unbroken extent or expanse, continuous in space." The text of *Nox*'s therapeutic

questioning figures itself as "an unbroken extent" even as it is composed of fragments, and on the back of the single long page of broken-up text is an unbroken, continuous fraternal page of pure, mute whiteness. Carson performs the ritual of address. She talks with the "mute ash" of Michael. However, this act of declamation is undercut—"(why?)"—with new questions. The language of Catullus's poem blurs and complicates the boundary between the living and the dead. It laments the insufficiency of the funeral gesture. *Nox*, too, effectively renegotiates the sense of a definitive processing of grief, suggesting instead a ceaseless farewelling of the brother and processing of the fraught implications of the sibling relationship.

An earlier translation of Catullus 101 also appears in *Men in the Off Hours* (in 2000—the year of Michael's death), as part of a series of radical reworkings of Catullus (45):

> **Catullus: Carmina**
>
> *Multas per Gentes et Multa per Aequora Vectus*
> (Through Peoples Through Oceans Have I Come)
>
> *Catullus buries his brother.*
>
> Multitudes brushed past me oceans I don't know.
> Brother wine milk honey flowers.
> Flowers milk honey brother wine.
> How long does it take the sound to die away?
> I a brother.
> Cut out carefully the words for wine milk honey flowers.
> Drop them into a bag.
> Mix carefully.
> Pour onto your dirty skeleton.
> What sound?

"Catullus: Carmina" from *Men in the Off Hours* by Anne Carson, copyright © 2000 by Anne Carson. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

This translation provides a sort of prescription for *Nox* as well as a version of Catullus's insufficient mourning gestures. The directive to "cut out carefully" the words for the items offered as part of the Roman funeral rite reads like an instruction for the making of *Nox*. The iteration of the line "Brother wine milk honey flowers" in the repeated but altered form of "Flowers milk honey brother wine" anticipates similar textual iterations in *Nox*, such as the cut-up, vertical strips of Carson's translation of Catullus's 101, which are blurred, scribbled on in charcoal, and overlaid upon each other. The reference to the ritual items of wine, milk, and flowers, which were traditionally offered to the

Roman dead, emphasizes the poem's origin as either an actual component of the brother's funeral rite, or a figurative and formal mirror of it.

Feldherr writes that the rites at the tomb served to "punctuate moments of communion between dead and living with emphatic reminders of difference. The offerings made to the dead—salt, cereals, beans, wine, milk, and violets—are again deposited on the ground, or on a tile or stone, while the living by contrast take part in a human banquet reclining at a table" (213). On one level, Catullus's poem reflects the punctuation of boundaries between the living and the dead, which serves to purge and resolve the mourners' grief. However, the reordering of the offerings in "*Multas per Gentes et Multa per Aequora Vectus*" echoes Feldherr's argument that the "order" of the ritual—the assertion of clear boundaries, and the progression of grief—is actually unsettled by the form and diction of the poem. "I a brother" signals Feldherr's point about the reflexivity of sibling terms. It echoes the blurring of boundaries between brother and brother in the original Latin. It also anticipates *Nox*'s renegotiation of the finality of grief-work: "How long does it take for the sound to die away?" Carson asks. This is a question about the therapeutic processing of grief. Then she asks "What sound?," interrogating both the source and the direction of grief's anguish. Carson returns us to the source of the therapeutic necessity, and offers no fixing ritual to solve the problem of how to grieve, and how to *write* grief and family history.

* * * * *

An inquiry into Michael's repetitive behaviors is another means by which Carson investigates the complexity of the therapeutic process and the circular work of grief. Carson adopts the classic psychoanalytic symmetry between childhood neurosis and adult unhappiness, by paralleling images of her brother's childhood and his difficult adult life. She writes:

> My brother's widow tells me that when she
> first met him (Amsterdam) he was penniless. He
> walked into the bar and she looked up and said, That
> one I want to marry. They lived for two years on the
> street, sleeping in stairwells, eating once a week, this
> was after Anna, drinking a lot. Stairwell smell (I
>
> remember) him huddling in the stairwell where we
> kept our coats and boots winter Sunday blood on his
> face he was about nine and my mother around him with
> all her hands crying What now oh what now? (5.3)

By Anne Carson, from *Nox*, copyright © 2010 by Anne Carson. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

The transitional space of the stairwell is translated into a figurative bridge between child and adult, connecting separate moments of Michael's social isolation and self-destruction into a potentially decipherable pattern.

The image of blood on the brother's face is repeated later in *Nox*, when Carson translates her feelings about Michael's social deviance as an adult by describing a childhood memory connected with a black-and-white photograph. Again, this passage links the traumas of childhood with self-destructive patterns in the adult:

> When we were children the family moved a lot
> and wherever we went my brother wanted to make
> friends with boys too old for him. He ran behind them,
> mistook the rules, came home with a bloody nose, it
> puzzled me from the beginning, it made my heart sink.
> I have a photograph of him (taken in the bush behind
> Bald Rock) about ten years old standing on the ground
> beneath a treehouse. Above him in the treehouse you
> can see three older boys gazing down. They have
> raised the ladder. He is giving the camera a sideways
> invisible look. Years later, when he began to deal
> drugs, I got the old sinking feeling—not for the
> criminality of it, not for the danger, but that look. No
> one knew him. He was the one who was old. (8.2)

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The evidence for interpreting the text of Michael's psyche is sparse: a few photographs, a single letter, some childhood memories, and a handful of telephone calls. Carson's attempt to derive understanding from this scarcity is represented throughout *Nox* as muteness, blindness, and silence. In a sense, Michael's whole life is, to his sister, "a sideways invisible look." If we cast Carson in the character of the analyst and Michael in the character of the analysand, then he is a particularly elusive and evasive one. "What he needed from me I have no idea," Carson writes, "And when he telephoned me—out of the blue—about half a year after our mother died he had nothing to say" (5.1).

Carson's redescriptions of memories and images of Michael attempt an understanding of what Freud called the "stereotype plate" of human behavior. In "The Dynamics of Transference," Freud theorizes that people's patterns of behavior are iterative: they are repeated again and again, in altered contexts, throughout the course of a life (Bowlby 218). Commenting on this passage, Rachel Bowlby writes, "The purpose of therapy . . . would then be to help us to break the mould of our private clichés or stereotypical patterns of

behaviour" (218). Carson's investigation of her brother's destructive behavior patterns stages a search for a better vocabulary of imagery and association; it seeks Phillips's "fresh account of the unacceptable" (131). In this way, Carson engages in the kind of therapeutic redescription that Phillips equates with psychoanalysis. She makes a motion towards processing the past, and reaches for an understanding of the events and essence of Michael's life and death.

Yet *Nox* contends that the essence of these events is ultimately unreachable. The repeated behavior patterns are represented with texts and images of errancy and fragmentation. On one page is a photographic image of a staircase, which repeats the images of the stairwell in the texts quoted above. This image registers a tension between continuity and fragmentation, as the continuous climb of the staircase—the scraps of which appear to be taken from the same photograph—is cut into broken pieces that are laid apart from one another, suggesting the broken continuity of the climb. The iterated images of the stairs create the textual and material site where memories of the shadow side of Michael gather. They also register the broader tension in *Nox* between a definitive categorization of Michael's character and psyche—an attempt to make sense of his life through these "stereotype" moments—and a sense of the errant and irresolvable process of knowing him and grieving for him. Because of his death, it is too late now for Michael to "break the mould" of his "private clichés." As the lexical entry for "multas" suggests, it is "late in the night, perhaps too late" (1.0). The poet's attempt to break into these molds is figured as an extended performance of try and try again.

Carson adopts the image of the stairwell as a metaphor for Michael's status as an outsider, in both his childhood and his adult life. Similarly, the "sideways invisible look" (8.2) that Carson sees in the photograph of her brother as a boy becomes a locus point for understanding Michael's absence and self-imposed exile. These "private clichés" (Bowlby 218) require translation, but the source material is unstable. "Because our conversations were few (he phoned me maybe 5 times in 22 years)," Carson writes, "I study his sentences the ones I remember as if I'd been asked to translate them" (8.1). As Carson implies, her process of studying and translating her memories of her brother is necessarily provisional, and can yield as many versions as the process of translating from Latin or Greek into English.

One of the narrative's unstable points of attachment is this one-sided transcription of a phone conversation with Michael:

> Lots of crime in Copenhagen.
> Danes are hardworking.
> I am painting the flat.
> We have a dog that's him barking.

> Yes he barks in Danish.
> Don't go back to the farm don't go alone.
> What will you do sit on Bald Rock and look
> down at the graves.
> Put the past away you have to. (8.1)

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This transcription is as unavoidably manipulated as the lexical entry of the Latin word that occupies the page opposite. It is another uncertain entry into the brother who evades understanding. Each of *Nox*'s lexical entries and pieces of evidence is an entry, like a stairwell, into the text of Michael. Each "entry" (in the sense, too, of a "note," a provisional account or an aid to memory) is a way in to understanding Michael. However, Carson emphasizes the insecurity of these pieces of documentation by tearing up the photographs, fragmenting the letters, and otherwise pulling apart the material evidence of Michael's life. This exemplifies her anxiety about the paucity of her understanding of her brother, and the "sad gift for burials" that she has to offer. Michael refuses to be analyzed, and *Nox* enacts this refusal, alongside a refusal to do what Michael urges: to "put the past away."

In *Nox,* Carson emphasizes the uncertain process of translating a person. She expresses (then undermines) a wish for clarity:

> We want other people to have a centre, a history, an account that makes sense. We want to be able to say This is what he did and Here's why. It forms a lock against oblivion. Or does it? (3.3)

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The textual and visual images convey silences, blanks, and unanswerable questions. "WHO / WERE / YOU," Carson asks (2.1). The question is rendered as letters erased from within black fields of pencil shadings. The response, a page later, underneath an old photograph, reads: "I make a guess, I make a guess." *Nox* privileges an attention to the errant process of interpreting and analyzing a life. Carson's mode of writing biography is one of charged guesswork.

* * * * *

As well as Catullus, Carson takes other classical models as her guides in the writing of a life. She invokes Herodotus, the so-called Father of History, and claims that his model of history-making involves attempting to comprehend facts that are simultaneously "concrete and indecipherable" (1.3). "Herodotus

is an historian who trains you as you read," Carson writes: "It is a process of asking, searching, collecting, doubting, striving, testing, blaming and above all standing amazed at the strange things humans do" (1.3). With this list of verbs, Carson prescribes a paradoxically non-prescriptive method of attending to the *process* of writing the history of a life. Herodotus models a method of history-making that interrogates stories, facts, and hearsay, springing open these fragments of life-evidence to doubt and questioning.

For example, Carson reproduces Herodotus's citation of a fantastical Egyptian myth, which he follows with the interpretive disclaimer: "So much for what is said by the Egyptians: let anyone who finds such things credible make use of them" (10.1). The following page cites another of Herodotus's disclaimers. This one, however, is layered on top of another piece of text, which the reader can unfold to discover a scrap of a letter from Michael to his family. The prototype of Herodotus's interpretive skepticism, physically laid over Michael's own words, creates a heartbreaking inquiry into the scarce evidence of the brother's feelings for his family. The Herodotus quotation reads: "I have to say what is said. I don't have to believe it myself." And underneath, we find Michael's sign-off from his only surviving letter: "Love you. Love you. *Michael*" (10.1). This wrenching textual juxtaposition questions even the most taken-for-granted of familial truths, and emphasizes multiple interpretations, however painful, of Michael's meaning of love.

Carson also cites an image from Hekataios's *How to Go Around the Earth* (c. 500 BC) as a model for history's irresolvable motion:

> He makes out of myrrh an egg as big as he can
> carry. Then he tests it to see if if [*sic*] he can carry it.
> After that he hollows out the egg and lays his
> father inside and plugs up the hollow. With father
> inside the egg weighs the same as before. Having
> plugged it up he carries the egg to Egypt to the
> temple of the sun.

By way of explanation, Carson writes:

> Hekataios is describing the sacred phoenix which lived
> in Arabia but came to Heliopolis in Egypt once every
> five hundred years to bury a father there. The
> phoenix mourns by shaping, weighing, testing,
> hollowing, plugging and carrying towards the light. He
> seems to take a clear view of necessity. And in the
> shadows that flash over him as he makes his way from
> Arabia to Egypt maybe he comes to see the immensity

> of the mechanism in which he is caught, the immense
> fragility of his own flying—composed as it is of these
> ceaselessly passing shadows carried backward by the
> very motion that devours them, his motion, his asking. (1.1)

By Anne Carson, from *Nox*, copyright © 2010 by Anne Carson. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

This powerful image conveys a duality of forwards and backwards motion. The phoenix carries the egg forward. It travels with its burden of family grief over distances and through time, to arrive at a place where that grief can be processed through some kind of necessary funeral rite. At the same time, the "ceaselessly passing shadows" are "carried backward," to the place where the phoenix originates. This image beautifully distils the dual motion of *Nox*, the simultaneity of the forward textual motion of the book's grief-work, and the backwards passage of the poet's interpretive essays though layers of errant memory. The continuous, concertinaed page unfolds the fragmented facts of Michael's life. The first and the last page are, in a sense, the same page, which can be lifted out and travelled through, in an unbroken passage, from beginning to end.

The egg image also aptly suggests the work of psychoanalysis. It implies continuity between past and future: visiting the past, and bringing it into the present, to translate it into a more acceptable or transformative story. Like the image of the stairwell, the image of the egg is repeated again and again throughout *Nox* to assert the repetitive, ceaseless process of making history. Carson describes the church where Michael's funeral was held as "white and clean as an eggshell inside" (5.4). Then she writes that when Michael came to stay with her in 1978, before he disappeared overseas, "the apartment got dirty, cigarette butts everywhere and at last I was glad he moved on. One morning he butted a cigarette in a frying pan on the stove, sunny side up" (5.4). Further on, she writes that both her parents were laid out in their coffins, years apart, in bright yellow sweaters: "They looked like beautiful peaceful egg yolks" (5.5). The description of the cigarette butted "sunny side up" and the image of the dead parents as "peaceful egg yolks" connects Michael's absence, silence, and self-destructive behaviors to the pain he caused his parents—particularly his mother, who, in the last seven years of Michael's life, began to believe he was dead. "When I pray for him nothing comes back," she is quoted as saying (4.2). Carson writes, "Hopelessness built a wall in her. From her point of view, all desire left the world" (4.3). She interprets her mother's grief for Michael as a wall, a stopper, a silencer. She cannot feel the motion of her prayers for Michael arriving anywhere, though he is still alive. There seems to be a stopping of motion in the mother's therapeutic process.

This lack of motion banishes desire and imports a wall-like darkness into the mother's life. *Nox*, on the other hand, adopts the image of the egg to open up that motion. The egg that connects Michael's destructive stereotypes with the family's pain also implies birth, and in relation to the phoenix, rebirth. Travelling backwards into painful memories is ultimately a hopeful process.

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In Carson's explanation of her use of the Catullus poem, she writes, "No one (even in Latin) can approximate Catullun diction, which at its most sorrowful has an air of deep festivity" (7.1). In an interview about *Nox*, Michael Silverblatt suggests that the book might provide a model to help people work through their processes of grief. As he is searching aloud for a way to talk about *Nox*, he tries out a series of possible adjectives before being gently interrupted by Carson with her own idea of the way the book works out its grief:

> Silverblatt: "It's an absolutely great pleasure to be able to bring this book to others who may themselves find, through a process of grief, that they need a process of creation that will in some way demobilize, or diminish, or gradually—"
> Carson: "Make it festive."
> Silverblatt: "—transform into festivity."
> Carson: "I hope so."
> Silverblatt. "*I* hope so."

These are the last words of the interview, and their double acknowledgement of hopefulness suggests an antithesis to the "hopelessness" of Carson's mother's "wall." Like Catullus's diction, the image of the egg also finds a way to bind sorrow to festivity. The cigarette butts of Michael's "dirt" are metaphorically connected to the peaceful, festive, bright egg yolk yellow of the parents' twin funeral sweaters.

This transformation into festivity does not mean, however, that the shadows of grief and memory disappear. On the page in *Nox* that explains Carson's reading of the Catullus poem, the lines describing the sorrowful yet festive Catullun diction are covered over by a semi-opaque strip of material, which darkens just that section of the text (7.1). Similar textual and material strategies throughout the book bind insights into the brother's history to a repeated insistence on the night, the *nox*. Carson questions these insights, unsettling their status as fully processed proofs of catharsis. It is telling that Carson chooses the metaphor of the egg to represent her family history. The egg, of course, is a symbol for the eternal, clichéd question of *what came first*, a question that is ultimately unanswerable. Has the grief-work of *Nox* been an interpretive cure for the mystery of Carson's brother and for the experience of

mourning him? “I guess it never ends,” writes Carson: “A brother never ends. I prowl him. He does not end” (7.1). In Carson’s therapeutic biography, there are motions towards understanding and there are moments that transform sorrow into celebration, but there is no end, no final cure—no definitive interpretation that can evaporate the need for therapeutic exploration. The errant version of the past that the poet has vivified with *Nox* will always be available to a renewable process of renegotiation.

NOTE

1. As the form of *Nox* is one continuous scroll, the pages/folds are not paginated. Carson organizes the contents of the book by section numbers: “1.0,” “5.5,” etc. These suggest an almost scientific ordering of the evidence at hand.

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