

Corpse Poem

Diana Fuss

Corpse poem is a curious paradox. A dead body and a poetic discourse are mutually incompatible, two formal states each precluding the other. A poem implies subjective depth while a corpse negates interiority. A poem signals presence of voice while a corpse testifies to its absence. A poem quickens language while a corpse stills it. The fantastical coupling of *corpse* and *poem* denotes an extravagant rhetorical conceit, an impossible literary utterance. What to make, then, of an entire tradition of poems that deploy the strange literary device of a speaking corpse? Writers as diverse as Emily Dickinson and Thomas Hardy, Randall Jarrell and Richard Wright, H. D. and Dan Pagis have all used human cadavers as subjects of prosopopoeaic speech. Attributing consciousness and voice to an inanimate body, these writers irretrievably breach the boundary between the place where language intensifies (the poem) and the place where language vanishes (the corpse). Giving voice to the voiceless cadaver, corpse poems bring language more fully in line with death; they are literary fictions that seek to revivify and reauthorize the dead, at the risk of contaminating and killing poetry. To give *voice* to a *corpse* changes both.

In its most economical formulation, a corpse poem is a first-person poetic utterance, written in the present or past tense and spoken in the voice of the deceased. At the center of every corpse poem is a speaking cadaver, an insensate figure endowed with the power of speech. By corpse poem I mean poetry not about the dead but spoken by the dead, lyric utterances

Over the past three years I have unearthed hundreds of speaking corpse poems, an archival project that would have been immeasurably more difficult without the generous leads provided by friends, students, and colleagues. I would like to thank, in particular, Renée Allen, Timothy Aubry, Kristina Haddad, Dominick LaCapra, Marc Redfield, D. Vance Smith, and Susan Wolfson.

not from beyond the grave but from inside it. Abandoning the literary convention of the epitaph, a form of writing that can only be read from outside the tomb, the corpse poem undertakes to bring us inside the tomb, where speech survives the finitude of writing. Leaving no stone unturned, the speaking corpse poem differs in kind from the literary epitaph chiefly in its treatment of voice. While the epitaph reflects what Debra Fried has identified as an awareness “of its divorce from voice, of its condition as a distant trace of a voice now stilled,”¹ the corpse poem betrays a desire to wed itself eternally to voice, a voice capable of surviving death, a voice that conveys not a distant trace but a proximate presence. Corpse poems, in their formal brevity and subject matter, often resemble epitaphs, but not all epitaphs conjure speaking corpses. Put another way, not all poems *on* the tomb are poems *from* the tomb. While some epitaphs translate the voices of the dead, others convey the thoughts of the living. If the overlooked corpse poem has escaped scholarly discussion for so long, this critical neglect may be due, in large part, to the tendency to conflate it with the better-known epitaph.²

Corpse poems link the literature of *ars poetica* to the literature of *ars moriendi*, permitting poets to write as if they were in the grave, as if their voices, at least, survived the ravages of mortality. The speaking corpse belongs to that improbable body of literature one might more properly identify as *ars essendi morti*, the art of being dead. *Ars essendi morti* names a powerful oxymoron, since “being dead” annihilates the very possibility of “being” as such. Stretching the limits of ontology beyond the point of reason, the corpse poem poses a series of difficult questions about death, survival, and the animating power of language. Why would a poet wish to experience, prematurely, the state of decomposition, either one’s own or someone else’s? Why, and when, is a dead voice more appropriate than a

1. Debra Fried, “Repetition, Refrain, and Epitaph,” *ELH* 53 (Autumn 1986): 615.

2. For more on the epitaph, see Karen Mills-Courts, *Poetry as Epitaph: Representation and Poetic Language* (Baton Rouge, La., 1990); Cynthia Chase, “Reading Epitaphs,” in *Deconstruction Is/In America: A New Sense of the Political*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (New York, 1995), pp. 52–59; J. Joseph Edgette, “The Epitaph and Personality Revelation,” in *Cemeteries and Gravemarkers: Voices of American Culture*, ed. Richard E. Meyer (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1989), pp. 87–102; Elizabeth A. Petrino, “Alabaster Chambers’: Dickinson, Epitaphs, and the Culture of Mourning,” *Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries: Women’s Verse in America, 1820–1885* (Hanover, N.H., 1998), pp. 96–128; and Paul H. Fry, “The Absent Dead: Wordsworth, Byron, and the Epitaph,” *Studies in Romanticism* 17, no. 4 (1978): 413–33.

DIANA FUSS is professor of English at Princeton University. She is the author of *Essentially Speaking* (1989), *Identification Papers* (1995), and the forthcoming *The Sense of an Interior*. The present essay is part of a book in progress on literary corpses.

live one? What does speaking through the fictional persona of a cadaver allow poets to achieve that writing in their own living voices apparently prohibits? What, in short, is the purpose of a corpse poem?

In the essay that follows I explore a variety of reasons why a poet might elect to speak in the voice of the dead. Focusing mainly on American and European poetry of the past two hundred years, I examine the cultural functions of the corpse poem in the work of some of its most inventive and dedicated practitioners. Deployed in the nineteenth century principally as a vehicle of comedy or theology, the corpse poem evolves in the twentieth century into a critique of politics, history, or even literature itself. These five registers—the comic, religious, political, historical, and literary—provide the structural scaffolding for my construction of a theory of the dead voice in modern poetry. While I am particularly interested in accounting for the corpse poem's incredible surge in popularity in the modern period, as well as investigating the challenges it poses to other poetic forms like the elegy, I am also intrigued more generally by the complicated interplay between language and death that this vital new literary form so self-consciously foregrounds. I thus conclude my study of poetry's speaking corpses by considering the question of why a poem might be considered in the first place a suitable container for a corpse.

1

In the early nineteenth century, an important shift in the social history of death gives birth to the literary oddity of the speaking corpse. The Enlightenment transformation of the dead body from an object of religious veneration into one of scientific experimentation deidealizes and desacralizes the human cadaver. Industrialism's conversion of the entire corpse into a commercial item that can be bought and sold begins the historical process Philippe Ariès has so famously documented as the progressive silencing of death in the modern period. Science's commodification of the cadaver, interestingly enough, did not lessen the fear of death but actually heightened it, creating a new definition of the human body as spiritually irredeemable base matter. "When people started fearing death in earnest, they stopped talking about it," Ariès observes of the early nineteenth century, the period in which, for the first time in history, cultural anxieties about death "crossed the threshold into the unspeakable, the inexpressible."³ But in this slow, partial, and nearly imperceptible crossing, people did not, in fact, fall silent in the face of a depersonalized and dehumanized death, but rather began speaking about the dead in new and increasingly creative ways. Cultural

3. Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (Oxford, 1981), pp. 406, 405.

attempts to silence death were at once elucidated and counteracted by literature's growing interest in death's diminished presence.⁴ In response to the social decline of death and the cultural erasure of the human cadaver, poets, for example, began reviving the dead through the vitalizing properties of speech. The corpse poem demonstrates a cultural desire to *make* death speak, by inviting the dead to speak for themselves through the poetic fictions of the age. At the very historical moment death merely appears to fall silent, corpses start to chatter away in poetry, a medium that prior to the nineteenth century had been more interested in speaking *about* or *to* the dead than in speaking *for* or *as* them.⁵

Poetry's earliest challenge to the new cultural reticence towards death is, tellingly, a comic one. Thomas Hood, the first nineteenth-century poet to utilize fully the fictional voice of the corpse, relies on humor to defuse growing concerns over the practice of medical dissection and the industry of grave-robbing to which it gave rise. Prior to Britain's Anatomy Act of 1832, resurrectionists stole bodies from graves to fuel the black market in human cadavers, a market generated by increasing demand from anatomists. Several of Hood's poems address the communal fear of corporeal mutilation, gently mocking these anxieties while simultaneously magnifying them. In "Mary's Ghost" (1827), a woman visits her lover's bedroom to complain that body-snatchers have plundered her grave, dismembered her body, and sold all her parts for profit:

The arm that used to take your arm
Is took to Dr Vyse;
And both my legs are gone to walk
The hospital at Guy's.

4. For the most recent critique of Ariès's "denial of death" thesis, see Jonathan Dollimore, *Death, Desire, and Loss in Western Culture* (New York, 1998). Dollimore notes that the Foucaultian rejection of the repressive hypothesis on sex might pertain to death as well. Like talk of sex in the nineteenth century, talk of death during the same period was not "repressed so much as resignified," producing "a never-ending analysis of it" (p. 126).

5. Literary history provides examples of speaking corpses before the nineteenth century, though these corpses are fewer in number and in kind. Early modern corpse poems, often epitaphs in the manner of Robert Herrick's "On Himselfe" or Ben Jonson's epitaph on Sir Charles Cavendish, dramatize "the movement from personal grief to public praise" (Joshua Scodel, *The English Poetic Epitaph: Commemoration and Conflict from Jonson to Wordsworth* [Ithaca, N.Y., 1991], p. 9). In contrast, nineteenth- and twentieth-century corpse poems (as this essay will suggest) abjure both personal grief and public praise, reaching beyond a poetics of mourning. In a kind of literary relay, the decline of the epitaph in the romantic period (see *ibid.*, p. 344) gives way to the first real stirrings of the modern corpse poem, a form of mortuary verse that largely dispenses with conventions of memorialization and consolation. For discussions of the corpse in the early modern period, see Clare Gittings, *Death, Burial, and the Individual in Early Modern England* (London, 1984), and D. Vance Smith, *Dying Medieval* (manuscript in progress).

I vow'd that you should have my hand,
 But fate gives us denial;
 You'll find it there, at Doctor Bell's,
 In spirits and a phial.
 As for my feet, the little feet
 You used to call so pretty,
 There's one, I know, in Bedford Row,
 The t'other's in the city.⁶

This witty poem finds humor in the comic fate of Mary's body parts, with doctors far and wide each purchasing a piece of her. Exploiting the tendency towards objectification inherent in all literary *blasons*, Hood's anatomical inventory satirizes the commercialization of the body in medical research, a grisly industry that finds economic value in every human part: arms, legs, hands, feet, head, trunk, insides, and even heart.⁷ After her corpse has been first "bon'd" and then bartered, all that remains of Mary in the end is her voice. Yet while the presence of Mary's first-person enunciation in the poem might suggest that something human has survived the desecration and dispersal of the corpse, this voice becomes itself a subject of misogynistic satire. No matter how violated, fetishized, or objectified the dead body may become, Hood archly implies, the garrulous female voice will always survive to complain about it.

Hood's plaintive Mary introduces into poetry a tradition of comical corpses who, in bemoaning their fate, merely underscore and reinforce their own cultural irrelevancy. Almost a hundred years after Thomas Hood stages a conversation between a female corpse and the male companion she left behind, Thomas Hardy has one of his many voluble female cadavers conversing with a dog. The speaker of Hardy's corpse poem "Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave?" (1914) finds herself unmissed and unmourned, even by her beloved pet. Hardy's hopeful cadaver learns to her chagrin that the one who disturbs her peace is neither her nearest kin planting flowers nor her devoted enemy defacing the grave but rather her little dog burying a bone—not out of "a dog's fidelity" but simply because he "quite forgot" that this particular spot was his mistress's resting place.⁸ Hardy's poem in-

6. Thomas Hood, "Mary's Ghost," in *Selected Poems of Thomas Hood*, Winthrop Mackworth Praed, and Thomas Lovell Beddoes, ed. Susan J. Wolfson and Peter J. Manning (London, 2000), ll. 21–32, pp. 33–34.

7. Wolfson and Manning note that, in "Mary's Ghost," Hood's "punning dispersal of the female body literalizes with ghoulish comedy the Renaissance trope of the *blason*" (Wolfson and Manning, "Notes to Thomas Hood," in *Selected Poems of Thomas Hood*, Winthrop Mackworth Praed, and Thomas Lovell Beddoes, p. 324).

8. Thomas Hardy, "Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave?" *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. James Gibson (London, 1976), ll. 30, 35, pp. 330, 331.

dicates that, by the early twentieth century, cultural anxieties about death have changed from a fear of defilement to a fear of abandonment. Hardy retrieves Hood's speaking corpse to demonstrate how the resurrectionists' illegal exhumations of dead bodies, while disrespectful, nonetheless attributed more value to human cadavers than the modern practice of ignoring them altogether. Possessing not even the impoverished status of a commodity, the cadaver in the twentieth century suffers a fate more serious than exploitation; this body simply disappears, completely buried under layers of cultural indifference.

Most comic corpse poems are cast as ballads, a verse form with particularly strong ties to folklore. The folk ballad, firmly rooted in the popular superstitions of the day, offers an especially suitable vehicle for the articulation of widespread cultural fears about death, bodies, and burial. Long the literary voice of the disenfranchised, the ballad serves as a powerful platform for dramatizing the concerns of the poor, a group disproportionately affected by the medical and commercial trade in human cadavers.⁹ At the same time, the ballad form provides a fitting vehicle for comedy, in which the unfolding narrative structure unmasks the helplessness of the baffled corpse, powerless to prevent the dissolution or defilement of a body it no longer controls. Freud's conviction that behind every act of reverence for the deceased one discovers a barely concealed hostility finds independent confirmation in the corpse poem ballads, poems that give voice to the dead only in order gently to mock them. Freud's argument is explicitly historical: modernity, by turning simultaneously away from religious demonology and toward religious piety, diminishes the traditional ambivalence toward the dead, rendering them powerless and slightly comical.¹⁰ Such is the message of the comic corpse poem, where, like *Mary's Ghost*, the formerly fearsome dead are literally disarmed by the living. Any residual cultural hostility toward the dead thus takes the form of comedic overkill, reducing an already objectified dead body to the butt of an everlasting joke.

2

Religious corpse poems also make the most of the ballad, though more for its association with traditional Protestant hymns than for its roots in

9. See Ruth Richardson's fascinating *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute*, 2d ed. (Chicago, 2000). Richardson argues that the Anatomy Act, far from protecting the poor, made them more vulnerable to the threat of medical dissection, legally expanding the pool of available corpses from hanged murderers to anyone who died a pauper.

10. See Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (1913), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1953–74), 13:57–67.

popular folklore. While comic ballads invoke the speaking cadaver to counter the belief in a sinister afterlife, religious ballads employ the same postmortem point of view to revive the belief in a benign purgatory, an intermediate state between burial and resurrection in which the corpse is still sentient, neither completely dead nor totally alive. In the nineteenth century, the theological understanding of the status of the corpse hinges on the answer to a long-standing dispute in Christianity over the timing of the Last Judgment. Was the soul judged at the moment of death, passing directly out of the body and out of the grave, or did soul and body occupy the grave together until both were resurrected on Judgment Day?¹¹ Religious corpse poems investigate the latter possibility, implicitly supporting the notion of a transitional state in which consciousness and voice endow the human cadaver with a distinct presence of its own.

Perhaps no writer has penned more corpse poems than Emily Dickinson, who used the genre to testify to the central tenet of Christianity, namely, that through Christ's death and resurrection death itself has passed away.¹² Dickinson's corpse poem, "Do People Moulder equally" (*P*, 390),¹³ ends with the ironic funeral notice "Death was dead," the poet's knowing confirmation of John Donne's famous challenge in the Holy Sonnets, "Death thou shalt die."¹⁴ To Dickinson, the death of Death leaves the body of the deceased open to poetic inhabitation. No longer wholly contaminated by death, the speaking corpse becomes more speech than corpse, offering a less threatening vehicle for proclaiming one's faith in the afterlife.

Dickinson's speechifying cadavers, almost always gendered female,¹⁵ are perhaps most memorable for their spirited personalities: gruff, overbearing,

11. See Richardson, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute*, p. 15. See also Martin Werner, *The Formation of Christian Dogma: An Historical Study of Its Problem* (London, 1957), esp. chap. 11.

12. Dickinson composed three general types of corpse poems: poems spoken about corpses, poems spoken by corpses, and poems in which it is simply impossible to tell which side of the grave the speaker is on. Of these seventy or so poems, at least a third are clearly identifiable as corpse poems in the manner I have described: poems spoken from the point of view of the deceased.

13. For the Dickinson poems discussed in this essay, I follow the chronology and numbering employed in Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); hereafter abbreviated *P*.

14. John Donne, "Death be not proud" (Holy Sonnet 6), *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey (Oxford, 1990), l. 14, p. 176.

15. In those speaking corpse poems where no feminine pronouns are used and no clues to the speaker's gender are provided, Dickinson presents the body as neither male nor female but as simply a body without a clearly demarcated gender. Although Dickinson elsewhere assumes male voices, her avoidance of a distinctly male persona in the corpse poems can perhaps be explained by the poet's close identification with her subject, so close that it may in fact be herself she envisions finally in the grave. The poet may also have viewed it as entirely unseemly to inhabit a male cadaver.

peevish, and only occasionally tranquil, philosophical, satisfied. Not easily mistaken for the remote and idealized corpses of Ben Jonson's classical epitaphs, the silent and naturalized corpses of William Wordsworth's romantic elegies, or the ridiculous and macabre corpses of Thomas Hood's popular ballads, Dickinson's female dead are cadavers with serious attitude. "Bring me the sunset in a cup" (*P*, 140) begins one corpse poem in which the irritable dead, confined to the "little Alban House," demands that her listener compose for her a written catalogue of life's treasures:

Write me how many notes there be
 In the new Robin's extasy
 Among astonished boughs -
 How many trips the Tortoise makes -
 How many cups the Bee partakes,
 The Debauchee of Dews!

A list of everything the deceased misses most about life, this poem-from-within-the-grave expresses more curiosity about what the grave-dweller left behind than what awaits her. Another early poem, "Make me a picture of the sun-" (*P*, 239), is no less nostalgic, and no less imperious, as the speaker commands her listener to paint for her a picture of life's vitality to warm her in the grave. Written in the imperative voice of the imperial dead, "Make me a picture of the sun-" instructs the painter in the drawing's every detail: "skip—the frost—upon the lea -/And skip the Russet—on the tree -/Let's play those—never come!" Dickinson's dead, homesick for mortality, instruct the living to create for them a fantasy world without russet or frost, a still life without signs of death and decay.

Truth be told, Dickinson's cantankerous cadavers are rarely in a hurry to enter Paradise. These displaced dead find themselves exiled from both life and death, at home neither below nor above:

I never felt at Home—Below -
 And in the Handsome skies
 I shall not feel at Home—I know -
 I dont like Paradise—[*P*, 437]

Poised uncertainly on the threshold of eternal life, these anxious corpses express more regret than anticipation: "Eden'll be so lonesome," the dead lament (*P*, 437). If Dickinson's dead are reluctant finally to cross over, their hesitancy can be further attributed to their continued preoccupation with the living. Dickinson's cadavers are more haunted than haunting. In speaking corpse poems, it is generally the living who vex the dead, not the dead who unsettle the living. "'Twas just this time, last year, I died," one forlorn

corpse reflects, wondering who among her mourners “would miss me least.” In her grief at the loss of the living, this corpse consoles herself by looking forward to the time when her loved ones will join her in death:

But this sort, grieved myself,
And so, I thought the other way,
How just this time, some perfect year -
Themselves, should come to me—[*P*, 344]

By speaking from the point of view of the usually silent corpse, Dickinson transforms mourning for the dead into mourning for the living. In a Dickinson poem, it is the living who disquiet the dead, the living who disturb any chance the corpse may have for true respite and repose.

Not all Dickinson’s speaking corpses are dissatisfied with their lot; a few are perfectly comfortable in their new state of suspended animation. In “The grave my little cottage is” (*P*, 1784) the speaker happily orders her parlor and lays the marble tea, “‘keeping house’ for thee,” while in “I died for Beauty—but was scarce” (*P*, 448), two corpses in adjoining graves spiritedly debate the Keatsian question of whether it is better, or worse, to die for Beauty or for Truth. If Dickinson’s contented corpses are unperturbed by their deaths, their apparent indifference might be attributed to the trait that distinguishes them most: these good-humored speakers are hardly conscious that they are dead in the first place. “I am alive—I guess” (*P*, 605) presents us with a recently deceased body, a burial bouquet of morning glory in her hands, who convinces herself that because she is not yet in “a House -/Entitled to myself—precise -/And fitting no one else,” she is not a corpse at all but a body twice born. More memorably, “Because I could not stop for Death -” (*P*, 479) narrates retrospectively the speaker’s curiously belated recognition that the slow carriage journey that carries her past the three stages of life to “a House that seemed/A Swelling of the Ground” bears her, ultimately, to her final resting place. In these poems Dickinson explores the poet’s role as verbal conduit, a voice that bridges “the Distance/Between Ourselves and the Dead!” (*P*, 1068). More specifically for Dickinson, voice carries consciousness, and only consciousness, from one realm to the next. On this point the poet is emphatic: “Consciousness . . . alone/Is traversing the interval” (*P*, 817).

Other poets deploy the device of the speaking corpse to examine the darker side of the spiritual interval between life and death. Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s *Maud* (1855–65), a long poetic meditation on love and loss contemporaneous with Dickinson’s speaking corpses of the 1860s, and most likely a direct influence upon them, is striking for its complete absence of religious sentiment. Tennyson’s self-described “history of a morbid poetic

soul” chronicles one man’s fall into and out of madness. This poem’s speaker, a self-pitying “little *Hamlet*,”¹⁶ finds himself confined literally to a madhouse where he imagines himself and the other inmates as corpses, buried in a too-shallow grave:

Dead, long dead,
 Long dead!
 And my heart is a handful of dust,
 And the wheels go over my head,
 And my bones are shaken with pain,
 For into a shallow grave they are thrust,
 Only a yard beneath the street,
 And the hoofs of the horses beat, beat,
 The hoofs of the horses beat,
 Beat into my scalp and my brain,
 With never an end to the stream of passing feet,
 Driving, hurrying, marrying, burying,
 Clamor and rumble, and ringing and clatter;
 And here beneath it is all as bad,
 For I thought the dead had peace, but it is not so.
 To have no peace in the grave, is that not sad?
 But up and down and to and fro,
 Ever about me the dead men go;
 And then to hear a dead man chatter
 Is enough to drive one mad.¹⁷

For Tennyson’s speaker, the intermediate space between life and death already constitutes hell. Delirious and overwrought, Tennyson’s speaking corpse provides a vivid contrast to Dickinson’s more amiable dead, who even at their most plaintive never approach this degree of despair. His heart a “handful of dust” and his bones “shaken with pain,” Tennyson’s tortured cadaver cannot escape the incessant noise of the living. Life’s “clamor and rumble”—reproduced in the poem through blunt repetition (hoofs, horses, beat), harsh alliteration (*h*, *b*, and *r*), and frenetic pacing (“Driving, hurrying, marrying, burying”)—harass the speaker into madness, doubling his derangement and deepening his disorder. Radically subverting the more serene romantic portraits of corpses slumbering in the grave, Tennyson’s *Maud* paints a far bleaker and more cynical picture of the state of the dead,

16. Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir*, 2 vols. (New York, 1897), 1:396.

17. Alfred Lord Tennyson, “Maud,” *Tennyson’s Poetry*, ed. Robert W. Hill, Jr. (New York, 1971), 2.239–58, p. 244.

driven crazy by the relentless activity of the living and by the dead's own unquiet insomnia. Tennyson's agonized corpses lie at the opposite end of the spectrum from Dickinson's composed denizens of the grave. While Dickinson places her dead securely inside Death's carriage, as its horses' heads point toward Eternity, Tennyson locates his dead directly beneath the carriage, as its horses' hoofs beat, beat, beat into his scalp and brain.

Writing more in the Tennysonian than in the Dickinsonian mode, Geoffrey Grigson's contemporary corpse poems complete the deidealization of death begun by his Victorian predecessors. His poem "A Sandy Burial" (1967) confirms Tennyson's complaint that the temporary resting place of the grave is anything but restful:

"Sucking the dandelion roots——"
That's a poor milk, you'll agree
When I sucked a virgin's milk
And kings knelt to me.
No, I did not "rise again".
After they buried me
I lay under the sand here, dry
As skulls touching the tree.
Big fires in the sky, you say,
Dry up the sea.
Act the two-backed pure beast,
Lovers, on the sand over me.¹⁸

Cast in the form of a dramatic monologue, in which the corpse addresses a pious interlocutor, Grigson's speaker patiently deflates naïve Christian clichés surrounding the afterlife. This ironic nativity Christ figure, who as an infant sucked a virgin's milk and received the genuflections of kings, does not rise from his sandy grave to ascend into a brilliant fire in the sky, but instead remains firmly in the ground subject to the humiliation of lovers coupling above him. Another short Grigson poem, "Epitaph" (1978), also adopts a tone of stark realism to puncture the idealism that so often cloaks religious representations of the dead:

They buried me without
A penny for my fare,
So how long do I have
To hang round here
On this dank gapped

18. Geoffrey Grigson, "A Sandy Burial," *A Skull in Salop and Other Poems* (London, 1967), p. 47.

Wharf under this
 Mud-reflecting sky,
 Watching the polluted
 Stream go by?¹⁹

Grigson's bitter and blasphemous corpses never cross over to a Dickinsonian Paradise. They remain discarded in the dank polluted mud or in the unforgiving sand, pieces of raw sewage or dry bone in a classic modernist wasteland where there is no promise of resurrection, only the indignity of death itself.

Dickinson's "To die—without the Dying" (*P*, 1027) summarizes the central meaning of the religious corpse poem:

To die—without the Dying
 And live—without the Life
 This is the hardest Miracle
 Propounded to Belief.

This lyric's opening lines precisely capture the main fiction of any corpse poem, a persona poem in which the poet, through the voice of the animated dead, is able "to die—without the Dying/And live—without the Life." To die without the Dying is not really death, any more than to live without the Life is really living. If a Dickinson corpse seems unaware that she has died, it may be that, like the poet who speaks in her voice, she is a consciousness caught between registers, or as Dickinson aptly describes herself, "Myself—the Term between -" (*P*, 743). Ultimately for Dickinson, death is a mere "technicality" (*P*, 900), a relatively inconsequential event in a world in which to be alive is to be deprived of the eternal life only death can bestow, and to be dead is to be dispossessed of little more than dying itself: "'Tis not that Dying hurts us so -/'Tis Living—hurts us more -" (*P*, 528).

The corpse poem's chief appeal is thus the opportunity it provides the poet "to die—without the Dying." Yet for the poets who follow Dickinson, this phrase takes on an entirely different meaning, as death's quotidian presence begins to vanish from national consciousness. "The hurry-scurry of modern life leaves no one time to meditate among the tombs," Joseph Jacobs laments in his 1899 polemic "The Dying of Death." Death, he observes, "has lost its terrors."²⁰ Attempting to recapture a form of dying that

19. Grigson, "Epitaph," *Collected Poems, 1963–1980* (London, 1982), p. 188.

20. Joseph Jacobs, "The Dying of Death," *Fortnightly Review* 72 (July–Dec. 1899): 265, 264. Jacobs ascribes the moribund state of death at the end of the nineteenth century to increased life expectancies, the decline of belief in resurrection and eternal life, the disappearance of hell from popular theology, and the shift in clerical focus from preparing for the afterlife to living better in this one. In such a climate of rapid cultural change, Jacobs argues, death loses its power to influence; see pp. 264–69. More recently, Adam Phillips, in *Darwin's Worms: On Life Stories and*

has all but disappeared, the corpse poem takes on in the modern period a life of its own. In fact, the corpse poem has never been more popular than in the twentieth century, in large part for its capacity to re-create the intimate particularity of death—from the body's last breath to the corpse's ultimate disposition—that has been so severely attenuated by the rise of the official funeral industry in the late nineteenth century and the trend toward hospitalization in the twentieth century. Modernity, it turns out, is fertile ground for corpses.

3

Most corpse poems of the twentieth century see more gravity than humor in the postmortem lives of the dead. An entire subgenre of modern corpse poems express deeply held social commitments, uncovering politics where we may least expect to find it, in the bodies of the dead. Katherine Verdery, in her aptly titled anthropological study *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, identifies the two principal properties that make cadavers especially potent political symbols: their capacity to instill awe and respect and their capacity to instill fear and terror.²¹ Political corpse poems dramatize both these forms of identification with the dead, but do so explicitly to complicate the cultural tendency to treat the dead as either superhuman or subhuman. These corpse poems fall into two general categories: poems that deflate and poems that redeem. The first group humbles those corpses that have been culturally canonized, while the second group elevates those corpses that have been culturally debased. Both kinds of corpse poems aim to correct a social injustice—the politically opportunistic overvaluation of the dead on the one hand, and the no less calculated undervaluation of the dead on the other.

Perhaps the most interesting of the deflation poems is Langston Hughes's "Ballads of Lenin" (1938), a political corpse poem that also offers a rare example of a poet ventriloquizing several dead voices in turn. Casting his apparent tribute to socialism in the familiar form of the folk ballad, Hughes, drawn early in his career to Communist Party politics, speaks through the voices of three workers, each addressing Lenin in his tomb with the same refrain: "Move over, Comrade Lenin,/And give me room."²² The Russian

Death Stories (New York, 2000), attributes the dying of death to two intellectual figures, Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud, who together bring about a newfound finality of death by effectively killing off the idea of an afterlife: "It was not life after death that Darwin and Freud speculated about, but life with death" (p. 14).

21. See Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York, 1999), chap. 1.

22. Langston Hughes, "Ballads of Lenin," *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York, 1994), ll. 1–2, pp. 183–84.

peasant, the black American sharecropper, and the Chinese foundry worker represent in Hughes's poem the voices of the international proletariat, martyrs to the cause whose loyalty inspires the dead Lenin to rise in his tomb and to proclaim the everlasting life of the revolution: "*On guard with the fighters forever! / The world is our room.*" And yet, despite the energetic tone and animated language of the poem, it is conspicuously an army of the dead that Lenin now leads. Lenin's fighting words are no more than that, fighting words; his rousing anthem is a familiar echo, an empty slogan from a movement long buried. As much a critique of revolutionary fervor as an endorsement, Hughes's "Ballads of Lenin" gives vent to the poet's ambivalence about the politics of socialism. By 1938, the year "Ballads of Lenin" was published, Hughes was already subtly questioning the power of dead icons like Lenin to shape the future of the living; a decade later, Hughes would come to view the Communist Party itself as a lifeless movement, an entity as inflexible and distant as Lenin's embalmed body entombed in Moscow's Red Square.

Other political corpse poems use the power of poetic voice to dignify and to honor the dead; these poems inhabit the voice of the dead to make strong moral statements about the cruelty of the living. The poetic device of the speaking corpse has rarely been deployed to more devastating effect than in Richard Wright's "Between the World and Me" (1963), a poem that details, from the perspective of the victim, a barbarous lynching. Wright begins this long narrative poem in his own voice, recounting his sudden encounter one morning in the woods with what he initially identifies as "the thing":

There was a design of white bones slumbering forgottenly upon a
cushion of ashes.

. . . .

A vacant shoe, an empty tie, a ripped shirt, a lonely hat, and a pair of
trousers stiff with black blood.

And upon the trampled grass were buttons, dead matches, butt-ends
of cigars and cigarettes, peanut shells, a drained gin-flask, and a
whore's lipstick;

Scattered traces of tar, restless arrays of feathers, and the lingering
smell of gasoline.

And through the morning air the sun poured yellow surprise into the
eye sockets of a stony skull. . . .

Recognizing that the victim could have been him, and indeed that the victim *was* him insofar as lynching is an assault upon all black men, Wright finds himself suddenly becoming the "thing" that he describes:

The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting themselves into my
bones.
The grey ashes formed flesh firm and black, entering into my flesh.
The gin-flask passed from mouth to mouth; cigars and cigarettes
glowed, the whore smeared the lipstick red upon her lips,
And a thousand faces swirled around me, clamoring that my life be
burned. . . .

An act of unmitigated violence, lynching erases the all-important border between self and world, subject and object, person and thing that separates the human from the nonhuman. By dramatizing in the first person this shift from the human to the nonhuman, from the living to the dead, Wright replicates for the reader the experience of depersonalization and objectification that lynching ruthlessly enacts. Vividly dramatizing the actual lynching—the beating, binding, tarring, feathering, and burning of the black man’s body—the poem’s climactic stanza is so shattering precisely because the reader’s identification with the victim has long since been secured by the poem’s subtle shift into the voice of the speaking corpse. “Now I am dry bones,” Wright states in conclusion, “and my face a stony skull staring in yellow surprise at the sun.”²³

In spite of its disturbing ending, this poem draws its tremendous power not only from its ability to portray the radical dehumanization of the lynching victim but also from its simultaneous ability to rehumanize the dead through the agency of voice. The lynch mob, the poem’s anonymous “they,” is never given voice in the poem; the mob is depicted only as a mute and senseless thing, with neither features nor identity. In this poem, all affect and animation reside in the strength of Wright’s own voice: shocked, angry, articulate, and, above all, fully present. Turning the tables on the emissaries of violence, Wright portrays the mob itself as a pitiable thing. The lynchers are repeatedly associated in the poem with the detritus of their evening’s sick entertainment: loose buttons, dead matches, scrapped cigar and cigarette butts, empty peanut shells, drained flasks, and discarded lipstick. Identified only by their waste products, the mob is more a faceless thing than the fleshless bones of their victim could ever be. Wright specifically chooses the idiom of the corpse poem as a way to bring his readers directly into the horror of the event, but also to bring us out of it, through the vital power of his own insistent voice. His adoption of the speaking corpse thus serves two essential purposes: depicting the dehumanization of lynching, in all its literal horror, while at the same time pinning the nonhuman where

23. Richard Wright, “Between the World and Me,” in *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, ed. Carolyn Forché (New York, 1993), pp. 633–34.

it decidedly belongs—on the malevolent and amoral perpetrators of racist brutality.

In political killings, the corpse is intended to function as a sign—a message (and most often a warning) to the living. The political corpse poem challenges the cultural tendency to treat the dead body as nothing more than a symbol, an instrument for either the promulgation or the defiance of social change. Political corpses are killed simply to make a point; deprived of subjective voice, these corpses do not so much convey a political message as become the message. The violent reduction of a person to a sign literally kills the messenger, stripping the body that remains of any meaning of its own. By giving voice to the cadaver, political corpse poems belatedly seek to undo this semiotic violence by multiplying the ways in which the dead body might signify and by complicating the terms of both its utterance and its address. These poems ventriloquize corpses not to perpetrate upon the dead another kind of profanation but to make manifest the violence of turning any physical body into a form of political speech.

4

Richard Wright's "Between the World and Me" illustrates how far the corpse poem has come from Emily Dickinson's cordial and domestic representations of bodies and burials a hundred years earlier. In Wright's starkly graphic poem, the body is mutilated beyond recognition and there is no burial. The corpse has become what Julia Kristeva would call the utmost in abjection: a soulless, raw, and insolent thing.²⁴ This cultural shift in perspective, from the corpse as the soul's temporary abode to the corpse as pure waste matter, can be attributed to numerous historical factors, including an increased emphasis on sanitation and hygiene and a closer association of corpses with disease. The relocation of cemeteries from towns, and corpses from homes, did not completely erase the dead body from view, but it did fundamentally shift the grounds of its cultural visibility. Whereas familiarity and immediacy provide the common condition of a corpse's visibility in the nineteenth century, anonymity and estrangement increasingly come to constitute a corpse's visibility in the twentieth century.²⁵ The de-

24. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, 1982), p. 4.

25. The depersonalization of the human cadaver from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries is a complex and often contradictory movement that may, in the end, describe historical perception more than historical fact. The figure of the anonymous corpse, indistinguishable on the battlefield, can already be identified in representations of the Civil War dead, while the figure of the beloved corpse, washed and waked at home, can still be found in representations of the modern dead. For more on the social history of death, see Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford, 1996); Thomas A. Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife in Modern France* (Princeton, N.J., 1993); Christine Quigley, *The Corpse: A History* (Jefferson, N.C., 1996); Gary Laderman, *The*

velopment of weapons of mass destruction and the emergence of state-sponsored ethnic cleansing take the cultural aggression toward the human body to its horrific extreme, not just dispatching the body but completely destroying it. Technologies of modern warfare and modern genocide render the corpse visible as the thing that can now be made invisible, deploying weapons of such destructive force that the body itself disappears, reduced to a fine grade of dust. "That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout?" T. S. Eliot asks in "The Burial of the Dead" section of *The Waste Land* (1922),²⁶ the poem's very title a reference to the rotting battlefields of World War I, sown with the degradable remains of bodies too obliterated to be properly recovered and buried.

Given the potential for the wholesale destruction of the body in the modern period, it is at first astonishing to see the corpse poem taking deeper root in a literary landscape one would expect to find hostile to the sentimental Victorian fiction of the speaking corpse. But the historical annihilation of the corpse in the twentieth century does not kill the corpse poem. If anything it revives it, as poets seek to reestablish, ever so tenuously, the sum and substance of being that has been painfully lost. Randall Jarrell's World War II poem "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" (1945) keeps the corpse alive by figuratively returning his speaker to the womb to die:

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.²⁷

This speaker dies before he is born, killed by enemy machine-gun fire in the belly of an American bomber. Playing on the visual resemblance of a man hunched upside down in a ball turret to a fetus curled in the womb, Jarrell employs the impossible voice of the aborted unborn to convey the full horror of the gunner's premature death, a death that evacuates the speaker from a body he has barely begun to inhabit. Like the corpse poems

Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death, 1799–1883 (New Haven, Conn., 1996); David Charles Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity: Cemeteries in American History* (Baltimore, 1991); Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995); and James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830–1920* (Philadelphia, 1980).

26. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York, 1962), ll. 71–72, p. 39. Michael H. Levenson reads this entire opening section of *The Waste Land* as narrated by a corpse, "a corpse that has not died" (Michael H. Levenson, *Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine, 1908–1922* [Cambridge, 1984], p. 172).

27. Randall Jarrell, "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," *Little Friend, Little Friend* (New York, 1945), p. 58.

that precede it, this body that vanishes leaves a voice behind, a voice that recounts to the living the mysteries of dying. Jarrell's postmortem voice, however, differs from the others I have addressed so far; his is a strikingly distant and dispassionate voice, more laconic than descriptive, more empty than emotional. The voice that brings the speaker momentarily back to life for the reader is decidedly a dead voice, a voice denuded of particularity and distinction.

Jarrell's longer war poem "Losses" (1945) helps to explain the peculiar flat tones of his speaking dead. If his speakers are largely devoid of the animation that death ordinarily and ironically brings to the personas of corpse poems, it is because Jarrell's unburied dead have been denied the liberty of actually dying, an event that is as much rhetorical as it is physical. "Losses" begins with a close paraphrase of Dickinson's "To die—without the Dying":

It was not dying: everybody died.
 It was not dying: we had died before
 In the routine crashes—and our fields
 Called up the papers, wrote home to our folks,
 And the rates rose, all because of us.²⁸

In an age of mass death and world war, Jarrell's dead bemoan what Dickinson's dead celebrate: the death of Dying. The soldiers of World War II are not individuals who have died but mere numbers on an ever-rising mortality index. Sucked out of bombers or scattered on mountains, these soldiers' violent deaths are barely recognized as such. No tombs, no monuments, no wakes or funerals mark their passing; instead, the war dead receive only the courtesy of a death notice home. The euphemistic rhetoric and sterile politics of modern warfare, Jarrell contends, has cheated these soldiers of their deaths: "When we died they said, 'Our casualties were low.'" Casualties rather than corpses, the dead lose their individuality. Jarrell chooses to speak in the third person "we" for nearly the entire poem to underscore the deep depersonalization of modern death. Only at the end of the poem does the first-person pronoun make a triple appearance in a tentative assertion that the speaker is, in fact, dead: "the night I died I dreamed that I was dead." This solitary voice laboring to emerge from under the weight of the poem's collective pronoun confirms that, in the final analysis, the greatest of wartime "losses" is the loss of one's right to die as an "I" and not a "we," the loss of one's personal, private, and singular death.

While corpse poems can be found throughout twentieth-century literature, especially in the poetry of the two world wars, there is one group of

28. Jarrell, "Losses," *Little Friend, Little Friend*, ll. 1–5, pp. 15–16.

modern poems in which the genre is notably less common. Only occasionally does one find a poet of the Holocaust inhabiting the voice of a speaking cadaver; the Holocaust appears to mark the historical limit beyond which the corpse poem hesitates to venture. The point is clear: after the unthinkable event of genocide, no fiction of the living dead can possibly be sustained. For poets like Paul Celan or Tadeusz Borowski, death really has died, and mere words cannot bring it back. In the poems of these two death camp survivors, resurrection is a lost hope, and the speaking corpse an indecorous and cruel fantasy. "The dead will not rise from common graves / and brittle ash won't come back to life," Borowski admonishes in his antielegy "Farewell to Maria" (1942). Belief in personal resurrection has altogether faded, "burned away in the flames of the crematorium."²⁹ Celan is similarly blunt in his ironically titled "Psalm" (1963): "No one kneads us again out of earth and clay, / no one incants our dust. / No one."³⁰ Not even the lyric's traditional theme of dying, it appears, can furnish sufficient "inspiration to poets creating verbal tombs for a murdered people."³¹

The few Holocaust poets who do employ the voice of the dead tend to adopt neither an individual nor a collective persona but a unique voice that is both at once. "I am I" — / thousands of slaughtered I's," Jacob Glatstein declares, in a poem that reveals not the poet's desire to revive the dead but rather his own profound identification with the dead.³² Recent trauma theory reminds us that one might survive an unthinkable atrocity like the Holocaust and yet still not feel alive, a point made particularly eloquently by Charlotte Delbo in *Auschwitz and After*: "I died in Auschwitz but no one knows it."³³ The device of the speaking corpse articulates the sense among many Holocaust poet-survivors that they have already died and that their poetic tributes to the dead include themselves.

29. Tadeusz Borowski, "Farewell to Maria," *Tadeusz Borowski: Selected Poems*, trans. Tadeusz Pióro, Larry Rafferty, and Meryl Natchez (Walnut Creek, Calif., 1990), ll. 19–20, 12, pp. 110–13.

30. Paul Celan, "Psalm," *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York, 2001), ll. 1–3, p. 157. Borowski and Celan, survivors of the camps, both later committed suicide. I have found speaking corpses in poems of survivors who did not commit suicide, but, strikingly, virtually none in the work of those who did.

31. Lawrence L. Langer, "Poetry," in *Art from the Ashes: A Holocaust Anthology*, ed. Langer (New York, 1995), p. 555.

32. Jacob Glatstein, "I Have Never Been Here Before," in *Art from the Ashes*, ll. 43–44, pp. 658–59.

33. Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, trans. Rosette C. Lamont (New Haven, Conn., 1995), p. 267. On the paradox of trauma and survival, see Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, 1996), and Dori Laub's clinical contributions to Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York, 1992), pp. 57–92. Susan Brison, who cites the Delbo quote as an epigraph, offers the phrase "outliving oneself" to describe the peculiar experience of surviving one's own death. See Susan J. Brison, "Outliving Oneself: Trauma, Memory, and Personal Identity," in *Feminists Rethink the Self*, ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers (Boulder, Colo., 1997), pp. 12–39.

And I myself
 am one massive, soundless scream
 above the thousand thousand buried here.
 I am
 each old man
 here shot dead.
 I am
 every child
 here shot dead.
 Nothing in me
 shall ever forget!³⁴

These lines by Yevgeny Yevtushenko commemorate the thirty-three thousand Soviet Jews executed in the ravine at Babii Yar. With no monument to solemnize the site, the poet offers a silent scream, the poem itself, as a grim memorial to Babii Yar's "thousands of slaughtered I's." Both Glatstein's and Yevtushenko's poetic "I's" function, in effect, as communal "we's." Allowing the dead to speak through them, each poet tentatively seeks to reverse the depersonalization of mass murder by lending to the un-mourned victims of genocide his own individual voice. These singular poems do not presume to resurrect the dead, only to memorialize them from the respectful position of writers confronting the enigma of their own uncertain survivals.

The experience of being alive yet already dead or, more accurately, of having died before one's death, introduces into poetry a whole new verb tense: the past participle of modern genocide. Consider these lines from Dan Pagis's "An Opening to Satan":

As he waited in front of the new invention,
 Danton said, "The verb *to guillotine*
 (this brand-new verb of ours) is limited
 in the tenses and persons of its conjugation:
 for example, I shall not have a chance to say
I was guillotined."
 Acute and poignant, that sentence, but naive.
 Here am I (and I'm nobody special),
 I was beheaded
 I was hanged
 I was burned

34. Yevgeny Yevtushenko, "Babii Yar," trans. George Reavey, in *Holocaust Poetry*, ed. Hilda Schiff (New York, 1995), ll. 73–83, p. 94.

I was shot
 I was massacred.
 I was forgotten.³⁵

Written in the wake of Pagis's three-year incarceration in a Ukrainian concentration camp, "An Opening to Satan" conjugates, with resolute precision, the number and tense of state-sanctioned executions. Danton's wry declaration during the French Revolution that his imminent death by guillotine precludes the statement "I was guillotined" is contradicted by the twentieth century's newer and more efficient technologies of death, so fearsome in purpose and comprehensive in reach that even those who have escaped destruction feel singled by their power. For a survivor of mass murder, the statements "I was beheaded, hanged, burned, shot, massacred, and forgotten" hold psychological and moral truth, and nowhere more so than when that survivor assumes the grave responsibility of speaking for all the slain, as Pagis does in several of his most important poems.³⁶

Historical corpse poems offset the cultural process of forgetting with the literary work of remembering. Recognizing the power of the corpse itself to keep historical memory alive, these poems remind us that even the most abject body has a story to tell. A corpse is never completely silent, for, as any forensic pathologist knows, its materiality speaks volumes about the circumstances of its passing, the when, where, and how of its demise. A historical corpse poem puts these stories into words, inventing paradoxical new grammars to articulate the terrifying new realities of modern death.

5

In the range of corpse poems this essay has addressed so far, figures of speech come to stand in for the missing or forgotten corpses of history. Yet events like the lynching of African Americans or the massacre of European Jewry cannot be comfortably contained in any poem, including the unconventional corpse poem. Language can, at best, only imperfectly fill the void the absent corpse has left behind. If the modern corpse poem partially succeeds in addressing such difficult topics where more traditional poetic forms like the elegy fail, it may be because the fiction of the speaking corpse allows survivors of traumatic events to express their own feelings of premature death without either sentimentalizing or objectifying the dead with whom they identify. To be sure, the modern corpse poem shares many fea-

35. Dan Pagis, "An Opening to Satan," *The Selected Poetry of Dan Pagis*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley, 1989), ll. 1-14, p. 30.

36. Other corpse poems by Pagis include "Siege," "Testimony," and "Footprints," all of which can be found in *The Selected Poetry of Dan Pagis*.

tures with the elegy, including both a concern with the certitude of death and a faith in the reanimating powers of language. But, unlike the elegy, the corpse poem rarely presumes to console the living for losses so profound they transcend the compensations of mourning. The corpse poem rejects the elegy's poetics of apostrophe, a rhetorical trope that, in addressing the dead, inevitably draws attention back to the living. Apostrophe, in maintaining a clear distance between the living and the dead, between the I who speaks and the You who remains silent, operates as simply another more subtle means of obscuring the dead.³⁷ Through the rhetorical animation of the dead made possible by the trope of prosopopeia, the corpse poem seeks instead to redress the historical erasure of the corpse that even literary criticism has at times promoted. Dismissed by Wordsworth as a "tender fiction," prosopopeia falls out of critical favor in the early nineteenth century, only to be reanimated in the late twentieth century by Paul de Man, who resuscitates prosopopeia as "the master trope of poetic discourse."³⁸ When prosopopeia is allowed to speak freely, it speaks loudly, claiming to be the figure for figurality itself, the very voice of poetry.³⁹

Deconstruction's retrieval of prosopopeia at the end of the twentieth century helps bring the corpse poem to light, providing a historical opening for the critical assessment of a genre long concealed behind the more popular elegy. The ambition of the literary corpse poem—which often incorporates elements of the comic, religious, political, or historical corpse poem—is in fact to provide a counter or corrective to the ageing elegy. John Payne's sonnet "Resurrection" (1920), an ironic religious corpse poem in which the speaker rebels against returning to a world he perceives as full of

37. On apostrophe, see Barbara Johnson, "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion," *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, 1987), pp. 184–99, and Jonathan Culler, "Apostrophe," *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981), chap. 7.

38. William Wordsworth, "Essays upon Epitaphs," *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 2 vols. (London, 1974), 2:60; Paul de Man, "Hypogram and Inscription, Michael Riffaterre's Poetics of Reading," *Diacritics* 11 (Winter 1981): 33.

39. Deconstructive essays on the trope of prosopopeia all cite the same lines from Paul de Man's "Autobiography and Displacement," singling out for attention de Man's remark on "the latent threat that inhabits prosopopeia, namely that by making the death speak, . . . the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death" (De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* [New York, 1984], p. 78). These essays resuscitate de Man by speaking as de Man, through the vehicle of citationality. Deconstructive treatments of prosopopeia are all prosopopoeiac acts, attempts at reanimation in which the dead figure who is repeatedly made to speak is the figure of Paul de Man. See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires: For Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Culler, and Eduardo Cadava, ed. Avital Ronell and Cadava (New York, 1989); Michael Riffaterre, "Prosopopeia," *Yale French Studies*, no. 69 (1985): 107–23; and Melissa F. Zeiger, *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997). For more on the critical and literary history of prosopopeia, see James J. Paxson, *The Poetics of Personification* (Cambridge, 1994).

“vengeance and wrath and sorrow’s bitter brunt,” subtly deflates the elegy’s conventional tribute to the day of Resurrection:

The trumpet calls; the graves gape open wide;
 The shrilling clangours rend the shivering skies;
 The sheeted dead sit up and rub their eyes,
 It seems but yesterday since I, I died.⁴⁰

Payne’s weary speaker has no desire to heed the trumpet call and to rise from the grave to meet his maker. Come the day of reckoning, this slumbering corpse intends to roll over and to go back to bed: “Rise who may, I will sleep on and let God pass away.” The dead, Payne suggests, prefer to be left alone, undisturbed by man, by trumpets, and by God himself. Payne’s exhausted and jaded corpse revives only long enough in this fourteen-line poem to repudiate the elegy’s chief consolatory fiction: the desirability of a conscious afterlife.

Most modern corpses prefer inhabiting the way station of the grave to the unhappy alternatives of either entering what Dickinson calls the eternal recess of a life ever after (*P*, 413) or returning to the endless labors of a life already lived. Roy Fuller’s “Ghost Voice” (1980)—an especially apt title for describing the spectral utterances of any corpse poem—openly celebrates the freedom of the dead from life’s dual burdens of duty and concern:

The greatest sacrifice
 Giving up the everyday.
 But now I almost enjoy
 This liberty bizarre:
 Responsibilities gone
 I’d forgotten were tyrannies;
 Even no need to fret
 About your diurnal tears.⁴¹

Mourning is the obligation of the living, not the dead; the modern dead are immune to the tears of the living. In poems like Fuller’s “Ghost Voice,” it is as if the venerated object of Wordsworth’s poems to the mysterious Lucy, “Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course, / With rocks and stones and trees,” or the quixotic subject of Hardy’s contrite elegies to his neglected wife Emma, had come back to life to rebuke the poets for their excessive mourning and to beg the bereaved to leave them alone. The corpse poem’s repudiation of the elegy, however, is not simultaneously a rejection of the

40. John Payne, “Resurrection,” *The Way of the Winepress* (London, 1920), ll. 12, 1–4, pp. 21–22.

41. Roy Fuller, “Ghost Voice,” *New and Collected Poems, 1934–84* (London, 1985), ll. 5–12, p. 436.

dead. The corpse poem may disavow mourning, but this renegade poetic form more effectively raises the dead than elegy ever could, simply by lending them the agency of the poet's own voice. The dead live through the voice of the poet, creating the central and irresolvable contradiction of the corpse poem. Through prosopopoeia, poets reanimate the dead to instruct the living, not to reanimate them. These "ghost voices" refuse reanimation *through* reanimation. If poets were to take the antielegiac theme of the corpse poem seriously, then there would no longer be, not only elegies, but corpse poems as well.

Ironically, it is the frustration and discomfort with the elegy that keeps the corpse poem alive. Recent corpse poems, many adopting the classical persona of Eurydice, draw their rhetorical force from a concerted attack upon the perceived excesses of the elegy. Peter Davison's "Eurydice in Darkness" (1966) prefers the company of her familiars (the three-headed lapdog, the river boatman, the gaggle of furies, and even the Undertaker himself) to the "everlasting mooning and fiddling" of Orpheus's self-pitying dirges. This corpse poem depicts Orpheus, literature's paradigmatic elegist, as a self-absorbed narcissist "clinging to that lyre/As though the world depended on it." Fighting hard to preserve her death and to make it her own, Davison's Eurydice tricks the self-important Orpheus into facing her (and thus releasing her) from his sorrowful song, sending her laughing and spinning back to Hades.⁴² Pamela White Hadas's "Eurydice" (1979) is equally defiant, refusing outright to be the elegist's "dum dimwit ghost" following his "deathless voice" back to life. This second Eurydice, with her heart-rending plea "'O Orpheus, let me be,'" also tricks her would-be redeemer into turning, securing her own freedom from the coercive melodies of that "damn hymn."⁴³

The most memorable of the anti-Orpheus poems, H. D.'s "Eurydice" (1917), articulates this theme best, upbraiding the arrogant Orpheus not for failing to bring her back from the dead but for trying at all. "Hell is no worse than your earth," Eurydice informs the retreating Orpheus. At least in Hell she stands out more distinctly against the colorless background than the bloodless Orpheus among the vibrant colors of the living: "I have the fervour of myself for a presence/and my own spirit for light."⁴⁴ Eurydice may be dead, but she is not absent; in the corpse poem, the dead are present, if

42. Peter Davison, "Eurydice in Darkness," *The Poems of Peter Davison, 1957-1995* (New York, 1995), ll. 24, 5-6, p. 64.

43. Pamela White Hadas, "Eurydice," *Designing Women* (New York, 1979), ll. 14, 17, 11, and 22, p. 78.

44. H. D., "Eurydice," *H. D.: Collected Poems, 1912-1944*, ed. Louis L. Martz (New York, 1983), ll. 5.20, 7.4-5, pp. 54, 55.

only to themselves. The loss in the poem is merely the loss of life's monopoly on presence. These latter-day Eurydices insist that the dead have their own way of being and their own forms of knowing. In each poem, the world of the modern dead is neither demonized nor idealized; it is simply poetically realized as a space well beyond the recuperative reach of elegy.

The Eurydice poems communicate to the elegist the same message that all the modern corpse poems ultimately seek to convey: please do not assume that what the dead really want is to return to the living. The modern dead do not regret their passing; they object only to the elegists' presumptuous if well-meaning attempts to deprive them of their deaths. If death has died in the twentieth century, has the overactive elegy, forever trying to restore the dead back to life, helped to ensure its demise? Orphic elegy may be less an homage to the dead than a self-indulgence of the living. By employing the unusual point of view of the mourned, and not the time-honored perspective of the mourner, the modern corpse poem assumes one of its most important strategic functions: a forum for critiquing the literary pretensions of the venerable but outmoded elegy.

And so we arrive at the chief purpose of the corpse poem, the reason for its tremendous vitality throughout the twentieth century. The main cultural and literary function of the modern corpse poem is to make dying "Dying" once again. Speaking in the voices of the dead provides a way for poetry to make present a certain kind of absence. Corpse poems, unlike elegies, strive to reconstitute death, not to compensate for it. The corpse poem is not a substitute for loss but a vehicle for it, not a restitution for loss but a means to achieve it. The corpse poem can only dream about the luxury of the modern elegy to "practice losing farther, losing faster," to cite Elizabeth Bishop's haunting villanelle.⁴⁵ While the traditional elegy may be an "art of saving" and the modern elegy an "art of losing,"⁴⁶ the corpse poem constitutes neither a simple art of saving nor of losing but a complex art of saving loss itself. The corpse poem thus illustrates a more complicated and contradictory relation to loss than the elegy, which continues to rely heavily upon a binary of consolation and refusal that the corpse poem views as suspect in

45. Elizabeth Bishop, "One Art," *Elizabeth Bishop: The Complete Poems, 1927-1979* (New York, 1992), l. 7, p. 178.

46. In his excellent *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago, 1994), Jahan Ramazani, commenting on Bishop's "One Art," suggests that "if the traditional elegy was an art of saving, the modern elegy is . . . an 'art of losing'" (p. 4). For other treatments of the elegy, see Zeiger, *Beyond Consolation*; Dennis Kay, *Melodious Tears: The English Funeral Elegy from Spenser to Milton* (Oxford, 1990); and Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Readings in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore, 1985). While the literary corpse poem explicitly challenges the commemorative powers of elegy, many poets (Thomas Hardy perhaps chief among them) write both elegies and corpse poems, effectively hedging their bets.

a world that hardly knows how to calculate its losses. Corpse poems are never freighted with the heavy loss that characterizes elegies because they are rarely elegizing anything, not even the demise of elegy itself, perceived as an anachronistic art form ill-suited to the age of genocide.

Grief and mourning, if they appear in the modern corpse poem at all, tend to be afterthoughts or asides, something that takes place outside the bounds of the poem. This is not to say that bereavement has nothing to do with the corpse poem, but only to suggest that mourning is less a central poetic motivation than an occasional thematic subject in a group of poems that more frequently inveigh against bereavement. If mourning were the chief motivation behind the corpse poem, one would expect to find a wealth of poems memorializing dead loved ones. Yet, in my recovery of speaking corpse poetry, I have uncovered not a single poem in which a poet ventriloquizes the voice of a deceased parent, child, sibling, lover, or friend. A poet's deceased family and friends provide singularly inappropriate subjects for the corpse poem's brazen fantasy of resuscitation. These dead are fundamentally irrecoverable; bringing them back to life would entail nothing less than a violent occupation and displacement that would kill them off all over again. Avoiding the emotional quicksand of personal attachment, corpse poems instead choose to reanimate more generic personalities: mythological figures like Icarus or Persephone, biblical figures like Abel or Lazarus, cultural figures like Elvira Shatayev or Matthew Shepard, or anonymous figures like soldiers or citizens.⁴⁷ The critical prerequisite of any corpse poem is distance, an emotional buffer separating the voice of the poet from the body of the corpse, as if to shield the poet from the contamination and contagion such proximity to the dead inevitably entails.

Composed at a secure remove from the emotional maelstrom of personal bereavement, most corpse poems lack the considerable affective power of elegy. The corpse poem, when it moves the reader, moves us through social outrage or philosophical argument, rarely through raw emotion. Although its central purpose is to restore to dying the gravitas that recent changes in the culture of death have so thoroughly trivialized, the corpse poem, no less than the elegy, may be responsible for contributing to death's demise. The

47. See, respectively, Gary Miranda, "Icarus" from "Triptych," *Listeners at the Breathing Place* (Princeton, N.J., 1978), p. 19; Janet Holmes, "Chez Persephone," *The Physicist at the Mall* (Tallahassee, Fla., 1994), pp. 16–17; Pagis, "Autobiography," *The Selected Poetry of Dan Pagis*, pp. 5–6; Sylvia Plath, "Lady Lazarus," *The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York, 1992), pp. 244–47; Adrienne Rich, "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev," *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems, 1974–1977* (New York, 1978), pp. 4–6; Alfred Corn, "And Then I Saw," in *Blood and Tears: Poems for Matthew Shepard*, ed. Scott Gibson (New York, 1999), pp. 30–31; Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, "Absent!" *Songs of the Silent World and Other Poems* (Boston, 1891), pp. 20–22; and Edgar Lee Masters, *Spoon River Anthology* (New York, 1915).

sheer proliferation of corpse poems in the modern period is entirely symptomatic of the very problem these poems seek to resolve: the emptying out of mortality that deprives modern deaths of their singularity and distinction. After all, if the living can speak in the voice of the dead, then what exactly is unique or irreplaceable about death? A vacuous space any voice can fill, death in the twentieth century is completely up for grabs.

The corpse poem has an even more serious challenge to overcome in its unrealized mission to restore dying to its place of prominence and privilege. If the corpse poem has so far failed to cure the modern ailment of death without dying, then this failure can be attributed to the genre's own dependence upon, and routine restaging of, just such a problematic. The corpse poem is only possible in the first place because it permits the poet "to die—without the Dying." The chief question the corpse poem thus strives to settle—the death of Dying—is in fact its condition of possibility. Insofar as the corpse poem endlessly repeats the very problem it addresses, the death of Dying will never be undone, not so long, at any rate, as the corpse poem itself continues paradoxically to enact it.

6

I have addressed in my reading of the corpse poem the various ways in which poets temporarily give up their animate selves in order to channel, through poetic language, the voices of the dead. I conclude this literary exhumation by exploring more closely the intimate relation between the two terms of my title: *corpse* and *poem*. Why, exactly, is a poem an appropriate vehicle for a corpse? The answer is in part stylistic. In its isolated, fragmented, and unnatural form, poetry resembles a Yeatsian "rag and bone shop."⁴⁸ The broken physicality of verse aligns poetry, more than any other literary genre, with corporeal disintegration. But there is more to the association of poems and cadavers than their shared structural dissolution. At a more fundamental level, poetry's concentrated attention to words and their histories highlights the status of all words as dead letters. "Our every word is a 'dead letter,' a dead language handed down to us by the dead," Giorgio Agamben eulogizes in *The End of the Poem*. As early as Augustine's *De Trinitate*, Agamben notes, to poeticize is to "experience the death of one's own language and one's own voice."⁴⁹ Insofar as poetic language is already dead language, my initial assertion that poets offer themselves up as me-

48. W. B. Yeats, "The Circus Animals' Desertion," *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York, 1996), l. 40, p. 348.

49. Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif., 1999), p. 74.

diums for the dead merely disguises the way death already speaks through the poet, through the medium of language itself.

Not every poet agrees that corpse and poem are completely homologous. Emily Dickinson, for one, remains unconvinced:

A word is dead when it is said,
some say.
I say it just begins to live
that day. [*P*, 278]

Acknowledging through the rhyming of “dead” and “said” that language is indeed fatal, Dickinson nonetheless challenges the assumption that a poetic word is a dead word. Language inevitably brings death, she concedes, but to the poet, not the poem. Anticipating the philosophical interest in the demise of the writer enlivening such twentieth-century texts as Jacques Derrida’s “Signature Event Context” and Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author,”⁵⁰ Dickinson’s use of passive voice in the first stanza implies that any poem is readable without its author. In a poem, a word exists independently, signifies on its own; words communicate and circulate in the writer’s absence. To the degree that all writing presumes the radical absence of the agent who produced it, philosophy’s infamous “death of the author” can only be read as entirely redundant.

Poets after Dickinson, however, are on the whole deeply skeptical of poetry’s reputed immortality. Writing in the shadow of mass extermination, Paul Celan, one of Dickinson’s European translators, contradicts his predecessor’s faith in the afterlife of language:

A word—you know:
a corpse.
Come let us wash it,
come let us comb it,
come let us turn
Its eye heavenward.⁵¹

Directly analogizing a word to a corpse, Celan invites his postwar readers to join him in preparing language for burial. Celan, who before the onset of the Second World War might have agreed with Dickinson that a word is not dead when it is said, after the war includes language in the death toll of genocide. Language cannot begin to explain the horrors of genocide because

50. See Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” *Limited Inc*, trans. pub. (Evanston, Ill., 1988), and Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley, 1989), pp. 49–55.

51. Celan, “Nocturnally Pursued,” *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, p. 69.

language is itself one of its victims. In Celan's understanding of the relation between language and death, words are corpses, and poems are coffins for language's remains.

Complicating the literary historical debate over a word's vitality, Sylvia Plath's poem "Stillborn" (1960) places poetry in an ambiguous space somewhere between life and death. For Plath, a poem is at once dead (stillborn) and alive (still born):

These poems do not live: it's a sad diagnosis.
 They grew their toes and fingers well enough,
 Their little foreheads bulged with concentration.
 If they missed out on walking about like people
 It wasn't for any lack of mother-love.
 O I cannot understand what happened to them!
 They are proper in shape and number and every part.
 They sit so nicely in the pickling fluid!
 They smile and smile and smile and smile at me.
 And still the lungs won't fill and the heart won't start.⁵²

"Stillborn" suggests that poems gestating in draft form are live poems, while completed poems are dead poems, fully formed but lifeless, like fetuses in pickling fluid. Because poems die before they are born, poets give birth to corpses. Poets, Plath implies, bring death to full term.

At first glance, "Stillborn" does not appear to be a corpse poem at all, at least as I have defined it in this essay, for it does not directly employ the first-person voice of the speaking cadaver. And yet Plath speaks in the first person through the poem itself, through the agency of the dead fetus that she mourns. By the end of the poem, poet and poem, mother and fetus, living and dead have effectively changed places:

They are not pigs, they are not even fish,
 Though they have a piggy and a fishy air—
 It would be better if they were alive, and that's what they were.
 But they are dead, and their mother near dead with distraction,
 And they stupidly stare, and do not speak of her.

Plath's "I" becomes "their mother" and her "me" becomes a "her," grammatically reversing the poem's subject-object positions. In a subtle chiasmatic reversal, the fetus lends voice to the now muted poet. Plath's poems do not speak "of her," but they are the only things speaking *for* her. Ironically, Plath can speak in the poem only through the agency of the dead words

52. Plath, "Stillborn," *The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath*, ll. 1–10, p. 142.

she memorializes. Here we find the deepest and most disturbing connection between corpses and poems. Strictly speaking, it may not in fact be the case that the poet, through language, animates the dead. More accurately, it appears that it is the stillborn words of poetry that animate the poet. Poets are not serving as mediums for the dead; they are themselves dead without the poem to give them voice. Death thus animates the living, not the other way around, which is why a poet inhabiting the role of the speaking cadaver may not, in the end, be such a paradox after all.

The corpse poem as a specific poetic type tells us something important about literature as a whole: poetry can ventriloquize the dead because literature, as a medium, already incorporates death. The individual corpse poems I have examined in this essay collectively pose a larger question about the status of all literature. Is not every literary utterance a speaking corpse, a disembodied voice detached from a living, breathing body? Literature that immortalizes voice also entombs it, which is why every poem can be broadly understood as a corpse poem. The speaking corpse names not just a particular kind of literary persona but a general attribute of all lyric poems, verse suspended between the animated voice of the speaker and the frozen form of the poem that preserves it.

Lyric poetry has always been one of the preeminent cultural mediums for the resuscitation of the dead. Yet in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, sound and sight technologies like the photograph, gramophone, telephone, radio, and film can each legitimately claim to revive the dead more effectively than the poem. Where the cultural work of reanimation is concerned, poetry has become in the past two hundred years a dead medium, superseded and displaced by far more powerful technologies of resurrection. The trope of the speaking corpse is thus for poetry, and perhaps for all literature, an entirely self-reflexive one. In the final analysis, the speaking corpse operates as a figure for poetry itself, a dead voice that refuses to remain silent, a spectral genre that continues to speak and walk abroad.