

Carousel

A Book of Second Thoughts



George Murray

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Books by George Murray

Poetry:

Carousel (2000)

The Cottage Builder's Letter (2001)

The Hunter (2003)

The Rush to Here (2007)

Glimpse (2010)

Whiteout (2012)

Diversion (2015)

Quick (2017)

For Children:

Wow Wow and Haw Haw (2014)

Truth is a dog that must to kennel.
—King Lear

Hearts



*...but one must go with saints in the church
and drunkards in the tavern.*

—Dante

The Carnie's Obituary

Dead in a Ferris wheel crash at forty-three, he was laid below an overpass by the highway, clad as he would have wanted in his best: rattlesnake boots, jeans, a leather vest, two arms full of green dragon tattoos; & they had an open casket as the cars whizzed by above, brought balloons, pink clouds of candy-floss, sticky pinwheel lollies, shabby red darts with bent fights, a string of flashing marquee bulbs with patio-lantern covers, an orange tiger on a leash; & in a moment of silence from the bullhorns, the bells of the carousel, the speeding traffic, his will was read, the inheritance handed out: for each a Throwing Ring, a single chance to toss a winner, to circle his head in a rubber halo & help him bluff his way into heaven.

The Siamese Twins' Separation

Rare (even for conjoined twins), they were inseparable; fused at the head, sharing brain mass, the big one's left hemisphere melded to the little one's right, their faces grown together in the dark soup of the womb, a single peanut-shaped skull with three eyes, a carnivalesque ability to guess each other's thoughts;

but when they tried to retire after years of touring (*psychic* card tricks in the big top, tickling one's foot as the other laughed) the strain of living in two minds became apparent; & as one passed in epileptic storms (vicious strokes rocking their head) the other, knowing she was only hours behind, spent her last moments quietly thinking her sister to sleep; death, the slowest memory, replaying a birth scene: the doctors working futilely above, their sad need for privacy.

The Medium's Observance

She always predicted she would return
to betray answers to the question of life,
universe, & death: *Be in my studio,*
she said, *three days after I am buried*
& all will be revealed! yet when
they arrived in droves, the pedals
that shook the table, the switches that lit
her crystals, the strings that levitated
her chair, the bellows that moaned
like lost souls, all lay exposed & in
disrepair; a note on the hollow table
full of bones & wet tea leaves reading:
For some questions, any answer is good
enough. Twenty-five dollars, please.

The Aerialist's Fall

For years she hung from a slim thread performing
amazing feats of contortion in the air, her silver
suit flashing in & around the trapeze, suspended
from fingers, knees, elbows, toes, feet, wrists,
chin, teeth, any part of her body with bones
able to lock into a hook; but at forty she fell

pregnant, was replaced by younger, slimmer girls
who wore less clothing, more makeup, had gold
dust in their hair; & though these girls talked her out
of abortion, it was they who stood by, awestruck
at her skill as she clung to life in the hospital bed,
twisting through the pain: the breech working
as gravity to bring her down & the intermittent line
of the EKG the unravelling cord to which she clung.

The Juggler's Suicides

Ever the straight man for others, he walked right into that last one, missing the pass as though he meant to, one of the flaming torches catching his loose, colourful sleeve, fire spreading across him in an uneasy smile; or maybe it was the live chainsaw grinding past his hand up into the artery under his arm that killed him, his partner catching him like a striped pin as he fell, supporting his head as blood flowed; or perhaps he died on the pinwheel, strapped spread-eagle, his sequined wife off her timing by just a heartbeat, later insisting he must have moved; but regardless, the crowd loved every second, cheering until he ceased twitching, never aware that the signs which could have predicted this were scars that couldn't be seen until he stopped moving his hands.

The Lion Tamer's Embalming

Some called him *totemic* (a tamer with a bit of the lion in him), others a saprophyte; yet regardless, you can all guess how he went, & it wasn't pretty, neither the act nor the conundrum of burial: his half-corpse forcing us to kill the beast, spill its belly in the Three Ring dirt to retrieve the missing pieces needed to finish the puzzle (sad, he had been so proud of being a simple man in life); but what came pouring out looked largely uniform, the bloody pre-performance feed suddenly so similar to the man himself (a mess of blue digestive juices), so we voted to defer the decision & bury them together, send them on as a *symbiote*: the lion & the tamer, each with a bit of the other inside, trust that whoever received them was more suited than we to judge what belonged to whom.

The Pugilist's Funeral

They filled the seats expectantly, listened
with growing excitement as the minister
read his name in a ring announcer's voice,
took turns leaning close to the casket,
speaking earnestly, urgently, each like a coach
in the corner at the end of round eleven;
voices strained but encouraging, taped hands
aching to wipe the pale from his brow
as though it were sweat, eyes searching his face
for signs of life, a second wind, any reason
to not throw in the towel: *You're on
the ropes, son*, one said in quiet passing,
*Keep your gloves up, duck & weave,
be where the blows are only after they arrive.*

The Escapist's Eulogy

This last trick should be his easiest, folks:
no chains, no cuffs, no white buckled jackets
or shiny locks, we won't even hammer
the black lid shut as a final gesture
(or perhaps *jest* is more apropos);
in fact, let's just leave a camera here,
something to record the scene in lieu
of his usual expectant crowd, & just
maybe he will prove us all wrong again,
banish our eager doubts by emerging
dirty & blinded in the floodlight-singed
evening air, waving & smiling as though
he knew all along what we did not:
that everything is escapable, even this.

The Daredevil's Passing

He had died a thousand deaths even before the cremation, or so the local papers said: *Human Cannonball Defies Gravity!* they read in playbill lettering over grainy images of a spread-eagled man being born into the air (a hooded, scythed figure waiting below where the net dangled like a stork's sack, or a black noose); yet below the silver cape & thunderbolt helmet, the daredevil must have decided his time had come (that he had gone down that tunnel a final time), because when the drum rolled & the fuse was lit & the crowd went still, he emerged from the cannon's mouth in a fetal pose, flying (as though by intention) past the swaddling nets, out over the grandstand, disappearing into the dark: an escape, the carnival folk said with sly smiles, risking life every night instead of boring old death.

The Fire Breather's Homage

A bright boy, he leaves us all in mourning:
many of you fans who followed his act,
others classmates from university,
some childhood chums; yet we all weep the same,
for we witnessed that he died as he lived,
in fearless howls of derring-do, quitting
his weekend employ with the fair just days
before the big physics grants came in;
& even as he ignited on that last
celebratory blow, some of you hoped
he might just have been proving entropy;
but remember to be careful what
you wish, because he may still be in here,
spreading through us like the slowest of fires.

The Ventriloquist's Homicide

His agent was cleared as a suspect when they discovered there hadn't been contact in years: the work drying up as the puppet boom ended with the decade, the jibes from Jimmy Rebb, his favourite dummy (Knee Figure, please) now just insults that seemed to go nowhere, to become more & more elliptical (inside jokes with no one inside); but a subpoenaed therapist cleared up the confusion (as they seem to do), jesting (from the side of his mouth of course) that ventriloquism is perhaps the only vocation that willfully cultivates multiple personalities, & our man (out of work) was forced to sell his figures to eat, causing a case of overcrowding (a state of mental Darwinism): one character choking at the others for rights to the only mouth, until all that was left was a corpse hanging from the rafters in the basement, good old Jimmy Rebb crumpled (like a broken spine) at its feet.

The Contortionist's Remains

The coffin was done long before she was (made it herself, she did, years before, but too small as was expected, a breadbox, really); & we, her only friends waiting at her side, stood guard over her intubated form in the asylum bed, kept our ears against her chest for the last rattling breath, unhooked her face when she flatlined, began folding her body in front of the horrified nurses (a final show for those lucky stiff): the soles of her feet turning back & around onto her breasts, the supple arms, legs, spine bending to fit so her sandwiched body might slide in, the joints working, clicking in circles to meet our hurried demands, rushing as we were against her greatest fear: life's need to lock her forever in a picture of how she died.

The Ring Master's Memorial

What he was known for was loudness, generosity,
a voice like the deepest tone of a bell, impeccable
taste in clothing, a penchant for hats, sobriety,
a patience for clowns, honour, punctuality,

a fondness for animals & small children,
hypochondria, voyeuristic tendencies, a soft spot
for trapeze artists, a lifelong love of chaos & the circus;
but all that said, he was not big on intelligence,
& when he asked to be buried in the centre ring,
no one had the heart to remind him that all carnivals

eventually leave town; so, he was left there
in the trampled field, the snowy roots of grain grown
between seasons above pressing down, year upon
year, & row upon row of orderly silence into his mind.

Diamonds



*Here is my gift, not roses on your grave,
not sticks of burning incense.*
—Anna Akhmatova

The Diviner's Eulogy

Without the children of which she always
dreamed the arrangements were left
in the hands of friends, a committee who,
to their utter horror, were forced to cremate
her remains three days after her death;
A tragic violation, some cried, *a travesty*
of karma; *Only a circumstance*, others said,
of fate, of chance, or perhaps a simple
testament to the nature of skill: each hole
dug since her final breath filling slowly
with black water, its gurgling, so dear
to her in life, now hindering a final peace;
her pelvis tilting like a rod above each
potential grave as though bearing down hard.

The Phrenologist's Cadaver

Dear Students, gather in; the casket is open so that we might explain as we educate: note how they died in each other's arms, more from mortification than the wounds, the good Doctor having knocked his well-angled brow against the linteled window located behind you (a natural propensity towards Sublimity, indicated here in the morphology of the upper pan, the cause; You see, struck mute by a cloudscape outside, he carelessly crossed the room in a Philoprogenitive urge to fetch his drooling son, who inauspiciously large head-base & sixty-degree facial slope, as you will note from casket number two, indicate tendencies towards Approbativeness & Inhabitiveness) & with the physical ineptitude inherent in deficient Vitativeness, fell headlong, crushing his beloved boy & falling out the window; in short, a bump on the noggin changing everything & doing them both in.

The Astrologer's Last Testament

In the later years she was confined to a bed with milky cataracts that kept from her the brief alignments night made, the sky spinning from glyphic specks to a black beach: *The stars are an engine*, she said once, *So, I feel now what I can't see*; & true to her word, she continued to read the dark like Braille, bringing believers to her side, people who held her bent fingers at the knuckle as though waiting for her hand to open, spill like an hourglass the answers to every little question: yellow, she loves you, yes, Tuesday, six, a girl, Florence, under the breadbox; yet in that windowless room full of faithful, even she was seen to pass, gasping as she faded: *These are not my stars!* her eyes shifting below the white as though searching the sky.

The Alchemist's Panegyric

Though a good mage, he lacked as a man, & his death has taught us all that even Great Workers such as he can die lonely (his wife, who sends her regrets, leaving like that one night as he poured over his vials in the cellar; & though in his mind he toiled at rotes for two—mixing elixirs of love & longevity, keeping an old flame pure for symbolic reasons—he was left with a brood of tiny homunculi careening about the laboratory, creating sinks full of dishes that would not transmute, dropping his Philosopher's Stone down the bathtub drain, playfully dousing the sacred fire so suddenly that his heart burst in his robes); so take heed, Sons of the Ether & Hermetics alike: though the technocrats may say he expired from a ruptured ventricle, we know he died of a broken heart.

The Exorcist's Epitaph

Beneath his white collar lay the aged
fury with doctrine that effected his death,
for he believed that how souls are damaged
(some unwound as poor fabric, others wreathed
in heavy stitch) is inconsequential
*(Evils, he said, whether exposed as demons
or dark fathers, exist more as denials
that defy prayers, waters cast, sermons);*

further still, the forms these spirits devise
(eyes spindled back, fingers clawed for succor,
shrouded hands steepled) are simply disguises,
appeals for amnesty, answer, candour;
but all failures pass, as did he: in blood,
teeth, & raging eyes that spun with ire (like God's).

The Eschatologist's End

After being diagnosed with the virus near century's end, he spent almost twelve frustrated years seeking proper explanations: reading the Quran, Nostradamus, the Bible, Mason lore, the Torah, Mayan & Aztec calendars, the Sunday Times, Druidic runes, Buddhist texts on monastery walls, yearly reports from Dow Chemicals, Pythagorean numerology; & as the end drew nigh, his gloomy predictions were echoed by others: the world, they agreed, would soon conclude; but unlike his embarrassed colleagues, he didn't get past the stroke of midnight, the clock clicking over as he fell to complicated pneumonia, a last passage from his survival journal reading:

*My only consolation
is at least I always predicated things would end this way.*

The Leech's Murder

Enraged at his son for dying, he found a new use for leeches: prescribing them for his own suicide rather than as bloodletters for pulmonary edemics, polyeythemiacs; but he was a big man, & once the creatures and drunk their fill, they fell to the floor bloated, sated, fat & dark as plums, leaving Y-shaped wounds that drooled long, hemophilic rivers down his neck, wrists, thighs; & though he tried again once recovered, cutting off their slimy tails, letting the blood run through them like exposed venal gourds, this too failed: his vigilant wife arriving with the saltshaker in hour eleven; but years later, when it was assumed his nerves had calmed, his nurses were shocked to find him asphyxiated in the office, the engorged leeches pulsing deep in his throat & lungs: *Murder-suicide*, a coroner friend concluded popularly, *Revenge and gluttony the twin motives*.

The Midwife's Obsequies

Because her own mother, ever the procrastinator, had passed the lore from a deathbed, she developed a neurosis she might otherwise not have, an urge borne throughout life: a general desperation for children to properly instruct, wee ones to listen in an interested but casual fashion to how a pendant suspended over the palm will circle for girls & rock for boys, how sugar on a new-born vulva attracts sweet men later in life,

why when a fetus first kicks it feels like bubbles blown in the stomach, what the best methods for turning breeches are; but month after month, year after year, she ran to the bathroom to find only blood; & while her therapist said it was perceived emptiness coupled with the realization that more cycles lay behind than ahead that drove her to jump, others think maybe she just woke up one morning sick to death of the suspense.

The Emblamer's Epigraph

For years he treated the bodies to dark, little secrets the living did not want to know, gossip he kept from the community for its own sake; his family & friends never aware how well he knew the raspberry birthmark below the doctor's navel, the size of the barber's withered single testicle, the butcher's superfluous third nipple yet where once he was renowned as an artist in the subtleties of life, he is now a minor sculpture of death: the cupid's bow scars of his own surgeries (heart, liver, kidneys) exposed like kisses on the trunk; & as he would have said of this turn, with great animation: *No smith with a craftsman's eye could expect payment for that!*

The Palmist's Elegy

Right until her death at ninety-three, she stood steadfast by a belief that the skin was simply a record, that with a little effort fate could be realigned however one desired:

You have a great future behind you, she often joked, Lines on the palm shift over time like tide rills on a beach;

yet even she passed, old & crippled, survived only by a skeptical spouse & six dubious children who bore silently the eccentricities of her life (the incense, crystals, scented candles, the quiet, level flutes); & while somewhere in the eulogy it was suggested that where she had gone she could finally be young again, her aged beau, so covered in wrinkles that he read like a map, looked doubtful, was even seen to examine his hand as the casket closed, no doubt wondering whether, if it weren't for time, she would recognize him now.

The Numerologist's Obituary

Sullyng Quantum Physics at Harvard caused, at first,
no real uproar; but two years later, while studying maths
at Trinity College, he was spotted down in
the quadrangle with a stack of occult texts: black covers
pressed with spurious prime numbers & red pentagrams;
& his stolid professors found themselves at sixes
& sevens over the blasphemy, their yearly meet
in October rocked by calls for exile from even
his oldest supporters, the German Physicists: *Nein!*
they exclaimed, *This calculated decadence must cease!*
& though expelled that morning during elevenses tea,
he seemed quite himself by noon; yet later that night

word spread of his jump from a floor that didn't exist.

The Oracle's Will

*Why has it been only the stupid ones with erratic fates
who have come seeking answers? those who burdened me
not with what I could tell, but with what I could not:
edges of truth that, like a butterfly's wing, can cause future
currents to shift (don't wander even familiar lands under
a new moon, always bring a friend to an outdoor loo,
fire escapes are for escaping fire, you can't fly, stay indoors
when it rains, it would be prudent to rid yourself of that
corkscrew before she comes over, metal buckles are a bad
idea on this unpredictable lake)—loose answers that could
alter the weather time bred long ago; below, my daughters,
I enclose a list of statements as your inheritance:
what couldn't be included is my apology that since your birth
it's always been too soon to tell you it was always too late for me.*

The Mountebank's Wake

The party only really got going once the mourners (conveniently given to bouts of hypochondria & loud displays) cut into the sack of specifics, tonics, & restoratives, emptying the chunky brown bottles into a large crucible where, on closer inspection, it was discovered that every potion was essentially booze: vodka with mugwort for the Knocky Knees, gin spiked with harebell for Croup, Wild Turkey with a pinch of garlic for Dum-Dum Fever, rubbing alcohol laced with the slightest taste of arsenic for hiccups; yet while some scoffed (claiming his dubious, sometimes lethal, physics were only cures for *funereal disease*), up until the new dawn broke everyone else seemed to be feeling just fine.

Clubs



*To move stones, to turn animals into men—is that what you want from me?
Oh, if you are still stones and animals, then better look for your Orpheus.*

—Nietzsche

The Claustrophobic's Burial

It was one of those coincidences often thought to be paranormal:

 he calling for his mother as the ceiling caved in, gasping, choking, vomiting her name until he calmed down, laid himself out flat on the cold ground, confessed to the other soot-blackened men that he had always hated mining but had never known until the earth came in so suddenly (triggering a fetal scene: a bloody patina, the chord coiling across him as though in indecision, the walls closing, squeezing down (no, wait, not a memory, but a memory's memory: how he got stuck in a fox den at age five, a woman, silhouetted outside, reaching in) the birth image being buried the instant it struck); & the parallel? oh yes: his mother,

 half a continent away at the moment he died, screaming as she clenched her legs around a lover's head.

The Insomniac's Final Rest

No one ever accused him of being a lucky man, & he was awake through it all, believe me: his wife leaving with the kids underarm, his dog run over by that drunk, his bleary night job slipping into ruins when he was caught red-handed in the boss's wife; but even those who knew him best couldn't believe how he went, or how he looked lying there in supposed bliss; shook their heads throughout the service, some in apparent wonder, others in plain disgust, a select few with a knowing set to the brow, a look that mimicked his own rheumy eyes only days before; & as these last were seen to pass, each peeking over a shoulder as though working up to the deed, they reached into the casket & hooked fingers up under his eyelids, trying desperately to pull them shut.

The Pornophile's Eulogy

Do we then celebrate the undeniable irony that it is now he who is being laid roughly down in the dirt, this surveyor of filth, his gaunt body naked, wreathed in salmon satin & involuntarily stiff, bony cheeks hung with blush, thin lips painted to please, black hairs & ugly yellow nails still seeming to creep in from under the skin; or do we smile, deducing that after years spent accustoming his ears to the noise of sex, it must be silence which he finally found erotic: the dark loam combining a lifetime of little deaths into one great ecstatic moment where he could finally come & go all at the same time.

The Pyromaniac's Cremation

The only way out, the other inmates said, is in a pine box, & it began to look (surrounded as he was by flat asbestos sheets, a cement mattress, cinder-block walls, a porcelain bidet) as though they were right; but when he saw a darkness spreading under his skin like a smoldering flower, he knew he had won; that in his desperation to leave nothing unburned (scorching even himself with the sun during yard breaks) he had beat the system; so he hid the blemishes under dungaree blues, fooled the guards, the warden, the other inmates who relished his suffering, bore the blooms until they were impossible to excise; but the state was still forced to operate, & he grinned as he went under, knowing that it was too expensive to bury, that soon enough, he'd be aflame, able to creep through the walls & escape everything, even the worst prison: decaying in a pine box.

The Somnambulist's Burial

At the funeral everyone kept expecting him
to rise, to jump out of the coffin
& traipse about the room, use his glassy,
dead eyes to wink at the frightened
minister & read passages from the Bible
he could now personally discredit;

but instead they just buried him,
upright as was his wont, left a bell
to ring in case of false alarm, in case
this great traveler of sleep found
something different down there
in the darkness of the soil, something
that might turn him up and out of his rest
& set him to walking urgently from the bed.

The Necrophiliac's Last Testament

You see, his wife died two months after their marriage, drowned herself in six inches of bath: the tepid water keeping her just warm enough for him to believe he could save her, push life back into her chest, make his air hers; but lacking the years of training, he failed, collapsed from exhaustion, lay heavily on her naked form, found himself buried in her without thought, a last moment of love (natural to him as a final kiss in the coffin) that shaped the rest of his life: six years of medical school, twelve small town mortuaries, eighteen non-consecutive months in jail, a brownstone walk-up in New York where a great view of the dying city crystalized his thoughts, convinced him that, like souls, ghosts don't inhabit spaces, but the materials which make them: *Making love to a body*, he wrote before pulling the trigger, *is making love: to a body.*

The Metempsychotic's Monument

For years his daughter lobbied to have the tree allowed into evidence, her hypothesis of murder to be supported on grounds that at death, the soul escapes is reincarnated: in this case, her father (a known conservationist) choosing a nearby oak as his spiritual receptacle; the tree, she argued, could yield from its rings a valuable harvest of information: Here, here, & here, she explained with a pointer, are anomalous marks of violence correlating precisely with his burial! & sure enough, the green cross section of wood bore wicked marks like lightning strikes; yet though the skeptical judge, despite strong bouts of déjà vu, dismissed the case (noting that ruling in her favour would result in a sentence of patricide), in the fall the police re-opened six old investigations, observing sheepishly—

that of the shade trees
in the graveyard, her father
had the deepest roots.

The Menophobic's Inquiry

The prescription didn't kill him, even improperly filled as it was (triphasil freakishly packaged as amoxicillin), though a share of blame does lie with the pediatrician who signed: not because he knew the boy was a hemophobe (moreover, unable to stand the sight of his own veins), but because (in some misguided attempt at clemency) he concealed at birth the child's hermaphroditic nature (tiny vaginal opening near the anus, grape-sized uterus, the single ovary), hoping perhaps the surplus organs would never yield; yet fourteen years later (in the final days of medicating a nasty ear infection), the parents found their beloved son prone in front of the toilet (pants at ankles); hands, legs, floor covered in thick, tea-coloured clots; & while the lawyers allege he died of fright, the records attest to shock, massive hemorrhaging, & menorrhagia (& are even signed with an expert's shaky hand).

The Agoraphobic's Sepulture

When the will stipulated a closed casket, fights broke out among his survivors: the family (maybe still bitter about his hermitage) suggesting the installation of a window in the lid so they, deserted so cruelly twenty years before, might circumvent the law & have a last peek at his uneasy form; yet while his friends (perhaps recalling the day he unexpectedly choked on the open sky) argued that the window violated the spirit of his request & robbed his final moments of dignity, the family always wins in these cases, & besides, the relatives said they'd be damned if they were going to miss the look on his face as he was shut in for good; & sure enough, his body only seemed to relax as the first handfuls of earth were strewn across his face.

The Narcissist's Kaddish

*By this hillock he lies, for like others
in self-love, he drowned in the idea
of life's impermanence: husband, father,
brother, son, in every role a piece
of himself that would live on in memory,
Yarzeit & blood, yet he knew that one
day even this would end: his hazel eyes
& dark hair losing to the final dooms
of death & birth like mountains turned to hills
under water & wind; so for Shivah
we cover the mirrors & say farewell,
praying that while these carved words may one
day fade, they will never be indistinguishable
from the beautiful face of stone*

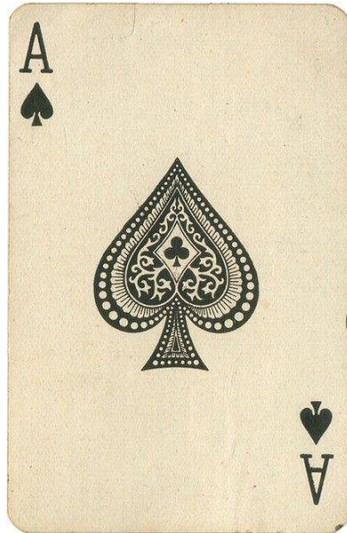
The Maieusiophobic's Obituary

It wasn't the pain that frightened her, it was the idea of a child emerging from her deformed, eyeless, mouth hung between two points like a loose leash, fingers with extra joints that moved like snakes; fox-headed, lizard-bellied, loon-eyed babies clawing up to her breast, snuffling their wet black snouts & gnashing row upon row of needled teeth; images she suffered nightly from infancy, such awful terrors that the doctors finally declared her stricken with prenatal memories, perhaps a twin her mother miscarried early; & while none were surprised when she asked to go under for her own child's birth, no one could predict that only her husband would be there to see the little beast arrive; but why, when all was said & done, she chose to stay down there in the fetal darkness of her mind will forever remain unclear to everyone except her & the world's long lost siblings.

The Amnesiac's Memorial

When he came to us all those years ago, washed up like that on shore with no clothes, tattoos, dental fillings, or other identifying marks, we bandaged his head as best we could, each shifted an inch to the side to allow him space in our community: a job cleaning floors at the high school, a place on the curling team, a wife, two children, town council, the mayoral chains, a well-furnished room in our old folks home: a perfectly fine new life from which to continue forgetting; but that tumble at dinner last week, resulting in a broken hip & knocked head, brought back the past like the very waves that washed him onshore; & though he cried until he died two nights later, he told us it wasn't because he was afraid of going: *Don't worry*, he said, smiling as he always did, *Remember, I've been through this before.*

Spades



There's nothing more debauched than thinking.

—Wisława Szymborska

The Gynecologist's Inquest

The found him hung in the stirrups, the note pinned to his chest with a scalpel: revenge, they surmised from clues such as his almost naked spread, the green gown open at the back & hiked up to the waist, a white sheet set carefully over the knees to block the light; murder, the cruelest of physicians, had pressed its cold-edged fingers into his belly, had run itself along his inner thigh like a poorly warmed speculum, had forced him to breathe out one last time so it might insert itself up into him, not to examine, but to mine, to dig out a space, then stitch up the wound; yes, revenge, but antecedent unknown: the pound of flesh taken from him still unfound, the note reading cryptically, *I know it's uncomfortable, but just try to relax...*

The Mnemonist's Eulogy

For forty years he secluded himself, worked on his theory that over the course of a lifetime the average person lives only sixty days, existing solely in *moments of being*, fragments of memory strung together with a loose through-line called *Self*: a blanket, a favourite toy, a fort, a kiss on the brow, a scene through a car window, a sibling's body on a slab, a wedding dress, a particularly deep sigh or two, an orgasm below the tongue; each moment just a shred of day but not the day itself, not the dishes, the showers, the shits, the touching, scratching, driving, stairs, & breaths; *Everything*, he wrote in his journal, *we are unsure of in mind, heart, & spirit, we reinvent as living*; so, as we gather today to disprove life like he did, let us now take him into our minds as he lies here, in this moment & no other.

The Obstetrician's Headstone

In her eightieth year, the family finally pushed for retirement, noting her tendency to overwork, to misplace glasses, to wipe surgical instruments on her sleeve as though cleaning silverware, to mutter to the labouring women like wounded men in from the trenches; but forced out into a life of lawn bowling, senior socials, obligatory ice creams with bored relatives, she began to display symptoms of true senility: loss of speech, blank stares at friends, sisters, sons, a slight shaking of the neck; *Nothing to worry about*, the doctors said, *Just the mind fashioning a cushion for death*; yet it wasn't until she went pale in the nursing home bed, stiffened, spread her legs & gasped, *I can see the head!* that her family finally realized she as still all there, had just spent too long searching for something at the end of the tunnel to ever turn back once she'd found it.

The Euthanasist's Suicide

Outside the angry crowd gathered in expectant silence bearing placards with slogans of hate: *Useless words,* the papers said, *to dismay a man whose last six months had been spent painfully mummified in the nation's top burn unit;* yet inside the white, sterile walls of the hospital, the death doctor lay quivering like the surface of a lake before a storm: for in front of him was set up his own machine, its clear intravenous tubes arcing into his arms, a red button on the black grip like a doomsday device; *Frightened?* the reporters asked; *Yes,* he replied, *but not of those outside;* rather it was the thought of explaining his actions to the hordes of former customers that made him shiver, the quiet ones who stood just inside the door, waiting at the flip of a switch for him to arrive.

The Anesthetist's Complication

Always a funny girl, but never big on pain,
she surprised everyone by choosing to have
her tongue pierced, though even this minor
bravery was tempered: a school chum flying in
from the coast to administer the local;

yet when the discomfort persisted, other shots
were given (the cheek, the chin, the neck, the temple
all swelling then falling limp in the spreading
chill) & before anyone noticed, she had no

feeling left anywhere: blinks growing protracted,
mouth slowing, drooling; & even as she faded
there was one last jest, an attempt to count backwards

from ten, but her lips blurred the numbers so that,
like everyone else, she didn't even get close.

The Somnologist's Necrology

Ever the empiricist, he studied sleep at arm's length, like one might watch a beast from behind the camouflaged nets of a blind, taking stimulants in order to work into the wee hours at collecting data on tape: rhythmic REM flutters, alpha wave peaks & lows, the violent seismic scribbles of night terrors; his own eyes shooting through with swollen capillaries, fingers developing permanent shakes, mind slowly shutting itself down in protest until one day, in a final act of rebellion, the unconscious took over, sent him tumbling down a flight of stairs, left him lying broken at the bottom where he got his best view ever; watched it circle, breathe, stalk him from the shadows; yes, like all biologists who get too close to their subjects, he simply forgot it was a wild thing & it tore him to shreds.

The Archeologist's Exhumation

The packed him in like a poor pharaoh;
with awl, shovel, fine-toothed comb,
a short-bristled brush with his name
engraved cartouche-like on the handle,
left him with possessions enough
to see him well into the next world;

but years later, when they suspected
he had been buried alive,
they exhumed his casket, only to discover
he was gone: had dug yards down
into the smothering earth instead of up
to the light & air; Maybe, some said, still
searching the past for various answers
to the present that eluded him in life.

The Astronomer's Obituary

The author many successful books that translate the night into layman's terms died late last week in his tower, a massive embolism forming under the brain like bubbles of air from a gasp; yet because he leaves no wife or children behind, the underfunded observatory contested his estate, arguing with his books as evidence that he thought of everything in analogies & that to him the telescope was kin, an Everywoman: sister, lover, mother, angel in the kitchen, devil in the bedroom; that one day this metaphor clicked over in his head like an ink blot shifting from figure to ground to reveal a new image, & suddenly he couldn't recapture his peaceful marriage with the stars, was unable to shake himself of the idea that space was a womb, the telescope a long vaginal canal, that he was now a father: the universe, for which he was responsible, being born directly into his mind.

The Neurologist's Vigil

When her last patient entered the parlour in bandages
he surprised us all (her colleagues of twenty years,
psychologists & surgeons alike) for we were unaware
he had regained consciousness much less relearned to walk;
so we parted for him like a craniotomy (laid out, as we
were, according to our areas of expertise in a rough map
of the brain) through which he cut straight to the dead
tissue; but whether in some deranged gesture of respect
or as part of an inside joke told during the surgery
(she was known to chat candidly with patients as she
weaved gravely in & out of blood vessels), he cocked
his concave head to the side & laid a jar containing
an excised tumour beside her body; & I, for all my years
involved with motor skills, could not move to do a thing.

The Abortionist's Last Rites

When she woke in the hospital, no one wanted to believe it was for the last time: the broken collarbone & ribs were cast, the internal bleeding in her distended belly had been slowed, & the drunken driver was sitting handcuffed & head-hung in the cruiser; she was almost, her colleagues said, out of the woods; but then, in a moment no lover expects, her husband was made to choose between his wife & the unborn child hanging inside her, was led to the bedside where her black eyes fluttered, opened with a ready answer he had heard before: *The decision*, he said, *is not mine to make*; & as the doctors wheeled her into surgery, she held his hand, speaking: *All death*, she said, *is about abortion*,

but all life is about choice.

The Cardiologist's Arrest

The report said they found her kneeling
in the warm August sea, a still human
heart cupped to her chest like a handful
of sand; her husband, the late doctor, lying
bare, empty from neck to navel in the town
morgue (having died only hours before
of a massive coronary seizure);
*& as search lights swung by, the poetic
policeman wrote, she looked back over
her shoulder with the flush of an escapee,
& uncapping her hands, let the quiet
muscle float into the shallows where,
in the ancient sanguine mix of salt & water,
it began to beat, & swam away.*

The Psychiatrist's Memorial

Gentlemen, as we celebrate his life, please rest assured that he went to his grave not cursing, as you may have heard, but thanking you, his loyal friends, contemporaries, old school buddies, the brave men & women who had him committed, prescribed the pharmaceuticals, the transcranial magnetic stimulation, the extensive electroconvulsive therapy that recharged his metabolically slow prefrontal cortex; & know, my friends, that he was so grateful to you for being determined to help him understand, that when the seizures finally claimed him, he was smiling, drooling, happy again; & though he couldn't speak for himself, or even nod, I'm sure he would have agreed that his lifelong mistrust for our motives, methods, & medications was, in itself, the most debilitating mental illness from which a doctor of his caliber could suffer.

Epilogue



THE JOLLY

Man, at bottom, is not entirely guilty, since he did not begin history, nor entirely innocent, since he continues it...

—Camus

About the author:

George Murray is the author of nine books: six books of poetry, two books of aphorisms, and one book for children. His work has appeared in magazines and journals around the world, including: Granta, Iowa Review, London Magazine, Mid-American Review, New American Writing, New Quarterly, New Welsh Review, Prism International, The Puritan, and others. He has been a poetry editor for the Literary Review of Canada, editor of NewPoetry.ca, and associate editor at Maisonneuve Magazine. He has taught creative writing in the MFA program at UBC, in Continuing Studies at University of Toronto, and given classes and lectures on poetry at Princeton, York University, Queens University, Memorial University, New School University, and others. He currently edits bookninja.com from his home in St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada, where he was the poet laureate from 2014 to 2017.

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