

## *The Elegist*

I exhumed from the muck, loam, and alluvial deposits a thousand  
and one fossils over the years:  
Fragments of pithy grasses, chips of clam shells, snails, crustacean  
carapaces—segmented, broken.  
Then, it seemed, the earth a kiln in which each passing and  
permeable moment was fired,  
And fired, made fragile. Fragile yet permanent, re-sown as lime  
into the coal-black dirt.

Tomorrow

Or what seems like tomorrow, a child finds my skull intact, and  
admires the useless hinge-work of the jaw.

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For the elegist, the rituals of farewell and the operatic spectacle of  
*exeunt* butter his bread.  
He writes for the living. He writes to orient the living toward the  
dead.  
He is a specialist, like a tailor, a ruled tape about his shoulders,  
his own jacket neat on the chair-back.  
(How uncanny the corpse as it stands up and shows us how the  
elegant cloth falls.)  
If asked, if needed, the elegist can measure our lengths and widths  
with a quick and intimate touch.

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A bit of a song snags in my mind and, like a cocklebur, is hard to  
shake loose.  
I won't quote a word of it, or hum the tune, or else you'll be stuck  
with it as well.  
I try to work, to follow a single idea to its obvious conclusion, but  
the song encroaches,

Interrupts, adheres, loops, gets its hooks in, yet its refrain must be  
the answer  
To a question I might ask, a question I should ask, once I can hear  
myself think.

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How could I forget the previous lives—a water strider's ease, a  
bluebottle on the dung,  
The hollow song of the whippoorwill resonate in a mockingbird's  
skull—  
The exhausting dance of one step forward and three steps back?  
Still, as I explain the sense of *déjà vu*, put it into words,  
what had  
seemed familiar  
Begins to fade like a dream one starts to tell, a dream effaced by  
the very logic of telling.