A Present Absence, an Absent Presence: Reading Kevin Hart's "For Marion, My Sister"

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What are the great unpresentables? God and the soul? Yes, indeed. But also death. There is no greater force of negativity, no more powerful urge to create, than the thought of death.
Kevin Hart (Kinsella 275)

Try to make out my words
Though death has pushed in front of language
Kevin Hart (Hart "For Marion, My Sister" 17)

KEVIN HART'S "FOR MARION, MY SISTER" IS A POEM THAT STRUGGLES WITH THE absence of the poet's sister. It longs to bridge that "great chasm" that separates the living from the dead. The work is preoccupied with the possibilities of language and imagination, the desire for connection and the uncertain return of those who have passed away. In one sense Hart's poem is indicative of the volume in which it is found. *Your Shadow* (1984) is a book haunted by images of death and loss. However, where many of the poems within *Your Shadow* speak of the poet's own death, or the dead returning in crowds as anonymous and silent specters, "For Marion, My Sister" describes a particular and moving relationship. Indeed, the strength of Hart's poem is the beautiful and intimate way it deals with the complexities of language and absence.

"For Marion, My Sister" can be examined in its own right, and much of this essay is concerned with tracing those contours of the poem as it appears on the page. Yet Hart's work also seems to resonate strongly with Kenneth Slessor's "Five Bells." Both poems deal with mourning and exhibit a deep desire to reconnect with someone who has departed. For Hart, it is his sister, whilst in Slessor's masterful elegy it is Joe Lynch, a friend who drowned in Sydney harbor. Furthermore, in both poems it seems that death has pushed in front of language in a way that both enables the poetic enterprise yet simultaneously ensures its failure. As Hart acknowledges in an interview with John Kinsella, this may be because "[t]o speak directly of death or God is the most difficult thing of all" (Kinsella 275). However, within "For Marion, My Sister" and "Five Bells" it is the more poignant difficulty of speaking *to* the dead that preoccupies each poet. In his own essay on "Five Bells" titled "Differant Curioes" Hart considers

Slessor's poem to be "one of the strongest poems written in this country" (190). It is important, therefore, to begin to read Hart by listening to Hart read Slessor. Naturally this is not to say that Hart's reading of "Five Bells" necessarily influenced his writing of "For Marion, My Sister." Assessing "influence" is awkward enough at the best of times, and in any case Hart's essay was published five years after his poem. Rather it would seem that there is something much deeper that links Hart's poem for Marion with Slessor's elegy for Joe Lynch. Thus, investigating the way Hart interprets "Five Bells" provides a useful basis for reading "For Marion, My Sister," foregrounding those issues that offer so much to any interpretation of Hart's work.

The title of Hart's essay on "Five Bells" is intriguing. "Differant Curioes." This immediately suggests a line from "Five Bells" where Slessor's attempts to sum up Joe's life through those chance objects that have been left behind:

> Everything has been stowed
> Into this room—500 books all shapes
> And colours, dealt across the floor
> And over sills and on the laps of chairs;
> Guns, photoes of many differant things
> And differant curioes that I obtained. . . . (82)

Hart chooses this line as a title because of its relationship with Derridean deconstruction. For Derrida, as Hart notes, a text is "conditioned by a movement of *différance*" when it is found "deconstructing its own performance" ("Differant Curioes" 189). Hart knows that in one sense Slessor's use of "differant curioes" is a coincidental precursor to Derrida's thinking, a word that cannot have meant for Slessor what it would come to mean for Derrida. However, Hart also argues that "Five Bells" does indeed exhibit *différance*, precisely in that it offers a search for Joe Lynch but simultaneously undoes this very project. Therefore, Hart sees "Five Bells" as a search for presence that must ultimately fail:

> "Five Bells" distinguishes between two modes of time; but it also develops a distinction between two kinds of sign: the proper name and the sign as such. Whatever else it is, "Five Bells" is a quest for the presence associated with "Joe Lynch," the name of Slessor's friend who fell one evening from a ferry and drowned. Joe has "gone from earth/Gone even from the meaning of [a] name" and the quest is to find that meaning. In one sense the quest fails, for Slessor cannot locate a pure self-presence which converges exactly with "Joe Lynch" . . . all he can recover is a network of signs. ("Differant Curioes" 191–2)

Interestingly in "For Marion, My Sister," Hart too is looking to find a connection that reaches past death. Similar to the desire Hart sees in Slessor, there is an

expectation that the proper name will yield some sort presence, and yet that desire is never realized, as endless texts, signs and contexts intervene. Accordingly, Hart's poem opens with this tension, the "almost" discovery of Marion within context after context:

> In London, where the hospital
> no longer rises above the rising skyline,
> I almost find you
> in faces older that the houses.
> Listen to me,
> try to make out my words
> though death has pushed in front of language;
> try to imagine
> this world behind the nails and instruments.
> I have tried to go back
> further than I can, thumbing through the album
> to find the page before the cover,
> and I am tired of it. (17)

The movement of contexts in this stanza is particularly striking. Beginning at the level of the city (London), the poem moves to the level of the building (the hospital), then on to individual faces and even words themselves. However, even as each context cascades into the next, narrowing the field of vision, the poem is never able to discover its object. Indeed there is a strand of negativity that runs alongside these contexts that begins in the second line. Here hospital itself can no longer be seen, obscured by a rising skyline. Similarly in lines three and four, although faces can perhaps offer faint traces of Hart's sister, this is never more than an "almost." Therefore, when we come to the word "language" (in line seven) and the imperative ("Listen to me"), it is evident that this kind of contextual focusing has failed. Even in language, there can be no link to the dead. One is reminded here of Derrida on the limits of signification in Rousseau:

> [I]n what one calls the real life of these existences of "flesh and bone," beyond behind what one believes can be circumscribed as Rousseau's text, there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the "real" supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. And thus to infinity . . . (159)

Similarly, when Hart reads "Five Bells" he notices the same kind of dynamic at work: "For the various significances of these three differing images of Joe indefinitely defer

any recovery of his ultimate meaning: the Joe Lynch we see and hear is inhabited by *différance*" ("Differant Curioes" 193). Yet if death eludes all, it also paradoxically stands at the threshold of thought and experience. So, in "For Marion, My Sister" death may be the unreachable and distant realm beyond or behind language, but death is also vast, inevitable and inescapable as it impinges on thinking. It demands to be heard as it pushes "in *front* of language" (17). Ostensibly what Hart means in these lines is that death has made words impotent, cancelling the possibility of a language of connection. But Hart is also more than aware of the thinkers who explore this relationship between death and language in a different manner. In *The Dark Gaze*, for example, Hart traces the contours of discussion between Yves Bonnefoy and Maurice Blanchot. For Hart, the differences between the two thinkers are marked by differing attitudes to Hegel. Against Bonnefoy's view that Hegel's account of the concept "simply contributes to the great refusal of death" (85), Blanchot argues that Hegel actually links death, language and concepts in a much more complicated manner. As Hart explains, Blanchot takes Hegel's view of linguistic conceptualization and demonstrates that "the concept's force resides in an eerie ability to introduce the negativity of death into language":

> In the first place, modern literature—roughly, that written since the French Revolution—is an affair of the concept; it "contemplates itself in revolution," conceives itself as a quest for what precedes its inevitable recourse to language, and assumes a tie between the concept and death. *To name something is to annihilate its unique existence and make it into an idea as well.* (*The Dark Gaze* 86, emphasis mine)

The point is that in creating a concept of something apart from the original, language enacts a kind of death. Thus, later in *The Dark Gaze* Hart once more catches Blanchot musing on Hegel and arriving at a similar location:

> Of course my language does not kill anyone. And yet when I say, "This woman," real death has been announced and is already present in my language; my language means that this person, who is here right now, can be detached from herself, removed from her existence and her presence, and suddenly plunged into nothingness in which there is no existence or presence; my language essentially signifies the possibility of this destruction; it is a constant, bold allusion to such an event. (qtd. in *The Dark Gaze* 116)

Thus language and death exist in a strange relation. On the one hand, language presupposes, announces, even enacts the possibility of death. On the other hand, language can in no way connect us with those who have died. Therefore, within Hart's poem, as readers arrive at the "words" which mark the ground and limit in the search for presence, they find themselves in this fraught position. And yet the poem

attempts to find a way out by offering the photo album as another link in the chain of contexts and signifiers. After the narrowed focus (city, building, faces, words) the mention of the photo album shifts the focus outwards once more, becoming a frame for each of the previous contexts. So as the poet speaks about the process of "thumbing through the album" attempting to establish some association with the past, the reader realizes that the first few elements in the contextual chain (i.e. London, the skyline, the hospital, faces) can themselves be read as photographs. If the search for presence drives this poem then we are heading in the wrong direction at this point. The album's pages form a kind of Derridean chain of differential references that the poet cannot follow past the cover. The futility of this project is verbalized in the stanza's final line. No leap out of language can be made. Here, even after the confidence of the poem's title, with its declarative proper name and the establishing of a relationship, the poet realizes the distance that cannot be crossed by the endless process of signification and deferral.

This tiredness, however, does not prevent the poet trying again to make that connection in the second stanza. Where words were the ground of stanza one, here it is one particular word, the proper name, that promises a possible connection:

> I say your name
> though it reminds me of nothing, like water.
> Your silence makes me think
> of clutching ice, watching
> its needles dissolve in my hand. (17)

Interestingly, Marion's actual name is not uttered. Thus what should be a proper name is presented as a general term. What is meant to be personal and specific is substituted, shifted back so that the reader is left with only the word "name." In some ways this seems to be the purpose of the stanza: to show that the name, which should be the essence of meaning and individuality, is nothing more than an arbitrary sign. This name reminds the poet "of nothing." It is the hanging signifier, the short circuit that never gains access to presence. A similar line can be found in Slessor's "Five Bells" where Joe Lynch is described as "Gone even from the meaning of a name" (82). Therefore, Hart sees Slessor's preoccupation with naming in terms of absence:

> Interestingly enough, we hear the proper name "Joe" only once in the poem;
> although "Five Bells" is a quest for the meaning of that name, and for the
> proper name in general, it is continually elided in apostrophe or replaced
> by "dead man." Slessor's initial faith in the distinction between names and
> signs begins to break down. The proper name which survives death is seen
> to live on only because it has always had the structure of the sign which is,
> as we have seen, that of a crypt. ("Differant Curioes" 194–5)

So like Joe Lynch, Marion's name (in its repeatability across contexts) has always carried the possibility of her absence. Indeed in its very nature as a signifier it not only fails to bear the weight of the poet's desire for presence, but it can only bear absence and nothingness. Thus the name mocks the very project that it can never complete.

It is appropriate, therefore, that Marion responds with silence, with a wordlessness antithetical to the signification that has filled the poem up to this point. Here the image of the hand clutching at melting ice is an important one with at least two possible readings. From one perspective the ice could represent a language that is forever dissolving, words that vanish even as they are grasped. Thus the poet's attempts to listen to the language of the dead, or to communicate across death's great chasm cannot succeed. Language must fail; it must slip into that space of absence between two realms. However, there is also a second way of thinking about this image. Language can act like the hand holding ice, wrapping itself around absence. Language may indeed think that it has taken hold of something, but this substance is illusory, melting into nothingness. Indeed the harder that one grips, the more that is lost, and this has been the poet's own experience. In one sense the heartfelt search for Marion using words, photographs, and her name has perhaps dissolved her essence. There is more than a hint of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle here, something viewed that is changed by the viewing. Of course this is also the experience of Orpheus turning his gaze toward Eurydice, and that desire for presence that leads to profound loss. The reaching out for full presence leads to drastic results, and this could be what the poet sees in his use of language in stanza two. Thus it may be that catching the dead with language is like attempting to catch silence using a net of words. It may be that the very mode of approach threatens to undermine the entire project.

Accordingly, stanza three sees the poet no longer speaking to Marion, but rather addressing himself. Here it is the image that may offer an experience of his sister:

> I tell myself
> I have seen you in the mirror
> before I see myself, a boy-girl face
> that weds us before I think. (17)

And yet the desire for presence here is so strong that Hart writes about seeing Marion before the image, even before thought. Once again there is an adroit reversal of the typical relation between image and object. Where images are meant to offer a connection to an object through some kind of representation, these lines see the object arising *before* the image takes shape. There are problems that arrive with this image. If the apparition has come before words and images, then how can one portray this moment without resorting to words or images? Hence the deliberately

inert description of the "boy-girl face" appears to be one attempt to convey the pre-cognitive experience. Of course the poet is quick to take stock and jettison this moment of recognition:

> This will not do,
> my face is different
> and I must have it whole. See my hands
> balancing a future
> withheld from you, a lake becoming a river. (17)

There are two important things to note at this point. Firstly, the apparition that arose out of the self is shaken off by gazing in the mirror *at* an image of the self ("my face is different"). Of course, if this focus on the "I" of the poet initially seems to evoke the Cartesian subject as the ground of epistemology (I think therefore I am), it is also quick to turn the Cogito on its head, as the experience of another *precedes* thought (so, they exist therefore I think). Gazing in the mirror therefore marks the movement back from the other to the self, as the poet attempts to "snap" out of this moment and once more sees his face independently of the apparition ("my face is different"). Secondly, the pre-cognitive experience appears to be rejected precisely because it is not a moment of true presence. As a ghostly fragment within the self and before an image, it does not fulfill the poet's desire to "have it whole." Therefore, the poet shakes off this strange moment of negativity and resumes the search.

Until this point it has been the poet who has longed for his sister. He has searched with image, language, a name, and she has remained distant. Now, however, the poet discovers something his sister can never attain. The withheld future is the fate of the dead, those who remain in stasis, who can never follow the river of time and becoming. Indeed, the image of the river suggests time's widening gap, the future surging ahead and leaving Marion behind. In one sense, then, it is the poet's sister who can never attain presence. There is a kind of symmetry here, a great gulf that no one side can bridge. The poet cannot thumb his way back into the past. His sister cannot flow into the future. Yet if Marion herself has always and already been cut off from presence, then the poem's search has been a futile undertaking all along.

The final stanza of the poem continues this ironic reversal as the poet is forced to justify his own presence within the flow of time in the face of his sister's absence:

> I have not stolen it, my elder,
> and cannot give it back.
> I do not know why you were chosen
> and I was not . . . (17)

There is an interesting repetition of "I" within this stanza (also evident at the beginning of stanza three), as the poet's identity is asserted against the accusatory absence of his sister. However, repeated assertion can lead to skepticism, and although the poem does not undertake that kind of dispersal of the self, we find in thinkers like Blanchot it does place strain on the self's cohesion and stability. Coupled with this emphasis on the self is the stanza's negative repetition ("have not stolen," "do not know," "cannot understand"). There is an interesting dialectic at work in the positive and negative aspects of the poet's defense. Negatively, he argues that he has not taken the presence, the existential future due to his sister. Positively, he asserts a kind of presence and existence with every repetition of the word "I". This is quite a Derridean moment, as the play of presence becomes the underlying structure of the work.

Furthermore, this self-justification is a response to Marion's inexplicable arrival. Up until this point the poem has emphasized separation, silence, and the inadequacy of language. There have been hints of Marion, almost found in faces, in a name, in a mirror. But for the poet, none of these are adequate. Indeed, the shape of the work up until this point has consistently indicated that no connection between the poet and his sister is possible. Remarkably, however, in this final stanza, it does appear that some kind of relation is taking place. Marion is felt pressing upon the poet, haunting him from within:

> I do not know
> Why you were chosen
> And I was not, I cannot understand
> what brings you,
> thirty years too late,
> back from another world, only
> tonight I feel you
> as our mother once felt you,
> trapped in a cage deep within me,
> beating steadily
> with articulate, insistent fists. (17–18)

The unreachable and "unpresentable" one suddenly returns, impinging on the poet's thoughts and feelings. There is a kind of symmetry of the unknown here. If death's election of Marion, her disappearance into absence, cannot be understood, then Marion's ghostly visitation must also evade comprehension. Importantly though, this description is also unmistakably physical, as Marion approaches from within, closely resembling (and perhaps even indistinguishable from) the poet's own beating heart. Initially one could read this emphasis on tactility ("feel," "beating fists") as a means of circumventing the problems of language and signification. However, the beating of fists also indicates a sense of frustration at not being heard

or understood. Therefore, despite the intimacy and proximity of Marion appearing from within her brother's heart, the poet's sister tragically fails to make herself known. Again this frustrated beating seems to echo that section of "Five Bells" where Slessor imagines the dead vainly attempting to converse with the living:

> Yet something's there, yet something forms its lips
> And hits and cries against the ports of space,
> Beating their sides to make its fury heard.
>
> Are you shouting at me, dead man, squeezing your face
> In agonies of speech on speechless panes?
> Cry louder, beat the windows, bawl your name! (82–3)

For Slessor, it is the barrier of non-speech that stands between the living and the dead, those who reside above and below the water's surface. Indeed, in the poem's penultimate stanza this is figured as the harbor tide ceaselessly enveloping the drowned man. Considering this image of "speech on speechless panes," it is interesting to find Hart finally describing his sister's interruption in terms of a language that can never arrive. There is an irony, perhaps, in recognizing "articulate, insistent fists" as the kind of signification that is impossibly near and yet forever untranslatable.

Even so, one could possibly argue that whilst this final image may not be the sufficient connection that the poet has desired, it is some kind of connection at least. Moreover, this is a *felt* connection, somehow beyond question, reminiscent of the intuitive intimacy between mother and child. However, Hart does scrutinize this kind of movement toward origins when he reads "Five Bells." In his analysis, Hart sees Slessor reversing the life of Joe Lynch in a search for an essential or generative moment. Thus "Joe, we are told is 'living backward', from maturity to childhood with its familiar images of comfort and authority" ("Differant Curioes" 195). Importantly, Hart notes that even this reversal cannot escape the mortality that stalks the poem:

> Even so, as soon as Joe directly approaches his origin, there is a sudden swerve from images of life to death. We see "fair monuments/And tables cut with dreams of piety." The image of the night trip to Moorebank in "slab-dark" now takes on a more disturbing resonance, as if the entire escapade had occurred in the tomb. More important, though, is that Joe's origin gets lost in the endless repetition of birth and death. (195)

The poem's final attempt to return to the womb can be read as a symbol of that strange pursuit of origins (and hence presence) that Hart observes in "Five Bells." This search is strange because in Slessor's poem the quest for the presence of Joe Lynch is always and already compromised by death and absence. Indeed, when considering Hart's work, if one is to assume that death's election of Marion somehow

occurs in the womb, then Hart's image, too, combines the promise of presence with a profound sense of absence (or maybe the promise of absence with a profound sense of presence). Thus, where one would usually consider the womb as an image of genesis, that point where a being becomes a presence, Hart's description finds itself in the shadow of death. To this end the poem's final lines are telling, describing the womb as a trap where the future is withheld, where there is no connection to presence, where the only language is the brute articulation of insistent fists.

Even within this final image, therefore, one can feel the tension that haunts "For Marion, My Sister." On one hand, to borrow Slessor's words, so much of the poem reminds us that "something's there," within faces, within a name, within a mirror's reflection, within the mother's womb, even within the poet's own beating heart. Thus the uncanny approach of the dead indicates that absence can somehow arrive and stake a claim on presence. However, on the other hand we have also seen that each of these contexts functions like a crypt or monument announcing that presence can never be attained. So there is a sense in which the dead can never arrive, never speak, never exist. According to Hart, "['Five Bells'] registers the weight of the dead and meditates on the possibility of their return." ("Differant Curioes" 189–90). In its own way, "For Marion, My Sister" offers a remarkably similar experience, where we are left, as Bonnefoy so beautifully puts it, "in anguished proximity to the great accomplished act" (14).

It is left to point out, perhaps obviously, that the poetic articulation of this desire for presence itself becomes the final context for all the signifiers within the poem. The poem therefore becomes the ultimate monument to Marion's irreducible absence. Hart notices something similar toward the end of his reading of "Five Bells" as he remarks that Slessor's poem cannot grant the link to presence that is so desperately desired: "In realizing that Joe's essence cannot be found in his journal, Slessor also realizes that it can be neither found nor preserved in his poem. Like Labassa, 'Five Bells' is a profitless lodging, containing brilliant scattered texts, 'differant curioes,' but no living essence ("Differant Curioes" 195). Therefore, one can observe that in both "Five Bells" and "For Marion, My Sister" it is the very desire for presence, the desire to somehow reverse the disconnection of death, that leads to the poem's own composition. Each poem, however, can only ever construct another text over a sense of loss and absence. Furthermore, each work sums up the paradox of language and death so well. Firstly, language cannot help but speak of death. Not only is the desire for connection overwhelming, but also, as Hegel and Blanchot so surprisingly remind us, the very structure of language presupposes absence. Secondly and simultaneously, language cannot speak of the dead insofar as it wishes to connect with presence. That gap can never be bridged by words. As a result, language and poetry find themselves in a double bind, speaking about how one cannot speak about the dead.

Without both the profound burden and the elusiveness of death, language cannot function and need not function. Indeed, part of the beauty of "For Marion, My Sister" is that poetry finds its life within the enigma of death. Interestingly, this too is Rilke's conception in his ninth sonnet to Orpheus:

> Only who holds the lyre
> among the shadows
> may be allowed to render
> the infinite praise (119)

In Hart's poem, then, the reader eavesdrops on a lyre held in the shadows. The song is beautiful and pained, desiring that which cannot be given and yet cannot be abandoned. This desire can be seen toward the end of "Five Bells," as Slessor dreams of discovering meaning, answers, and even the voice of Joe Lynch:

> If I could only find an answer, could only find
> Your meaning, or could say why you were here
> Who are now gone, what purpose gave you breath
> Or seized it back, might I not hear your voice?

In "For Marion, My Sister," Hart, too, wonders "[w]hat brings you / Thirty years too late, / Back from the other world." Both poets remind us that these questions cannot be answered using words, and yet the endings of their poems still hint at an otherworldly language. For Slessor, five bells coldly ring out, a tragically empty signification that has nonetheless generated the poet's masterful poetic work. For Hart, beating fists attempt to speak from within, and we are reminded that there is "no greater force of negativity, no more powerful urge to create, than the thought of death" (Kinsella 275).

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