

ESSAY

DEAR AMY

by Shara Lessley

I've traded Middle Eastern sands for snow: a half acre or so of it, freshly fallen and packed across the fenced-in lot just a short uphill walk from the village center of Lenox, Massachusetts. After travelling almost twenty-four hours by plane and shuttle tram, by taxi, train and car, I've arrived from my home in Jordan's desert capital of Amman to the slate-grey Cape-style cottage on Neilsen Lane where Amy Clampitt and her life partner, Harold "Hal" Korn, spent a good deal of their final two years together before her death in 1994. I've come, in part, to visit a friend—a writer-in-residence picked to live and work among Clampitt's bookcases, antiques, and china—but I've also come in pursuit of what the poet herself identified in the seminal essay "Predecessors, Et Cetera" as "the livingness of the past."

By the time Clampitt and Korn bought the little house on Neilsen Lane—"We have no plans to move out of New York completely," she assured her family via letter in 1992, but want "a place to go to on weekends and in the summer, and eventually retire into"—Amy was already one of the most highly esteemed poets in America. (A fellowship from the MacArthur Foundation helped finance the couple's real estate purchase in Lenox.) The rise of Clampitt's literary celebrity, however, was as unconventional as the woman who lived in relative obscurity for sixty-three years before publishing her first full-length collection, *The Kingfisher*, in 1983 to widespread critical acclaim. Born into a Midwestern Quaker family, Clampitt graduated from Grinnell College and later abandoned graduate study at Columbia. She once worked as a reference librarian for the National Audubon Society, travelled abroad, briefly sublet her apartment in New York's Greenwich Village in order to help care for her schizophrenic sister in Iowa, took up the arts of jogging and ballet, refigured herself as

a political activist, expressed in writing her conflicted feelings about psychoanalysis and the power plays accompanying serious love affairs, and even toyed with becoming an Episcopal nun. Throughout her six-odd decades of anonymity, Clampitt also drafted a series of failed novels and devoted much of her free time to self-education.

Although it would be years before she would move from the margins and into mainstream literary circles, thanks in part to championing in the late nineteen-seventies and eighties by *The New Yorker's* Howard Moss and critics like Helen Vendler, the poet's correspondence reveals a long and steadfast belief in her rightful place among the artistic elite. "I feel as if I could write a whole history of English literature," Clampitt avowed to her brother Philip as early as 1956, "and know just where to place everybody in it, with hardly any trouble at all. The reason being, apparently, that I feel *I am in it*." Thus, without any publication history, nor professional affirmation of her talents, the then thirty-six-year-old somehow intuited her work would one day find its readership. In the meantime, Clampitt bided her time, absorbing texts by the likes of William Wordsworth and Marianne Moore, Henry James and Charles Darwin, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Virginia Woolf. She devoured Greek classics, the letters of Keats and, at one point, considered Dante her master. "Vocation is a curious thing," she later admitted in print. "I made a real try at not wanting to be a writer."

It is February. Another storm warning's in effect. New England feels very much like New England. Two miles from Edith Wharton's sprawling, suite-filled estate, Clampitt's understated three-bedroom house rests on a scarcely populated street. Beneath changing light, white drifts turn clapboard-gray. "Sometimes the thermometer goes down to zero," wrote Amy to longstanding friend Barbara Blay during the last winter of her life,

but the thermostat works, there are snug storm windows...and a fireplace that we sit by to read aloud or just beam at each other, and there is also my own little studio—first time in my life, a studio that's mine and not borrowed for the nonce—which looks out on an expanse of New England meadow, with animal tracks to puzzle over every morning ...

True to her letter's words, there are tracks this morning to contemplate: spotted from the kitchen window, a half dozen wild

pheasants pecking at the snow. Watching the ground-feeders work their way across the perimeter in pairs and trios, I think of Clampitt's linguistic agility, her love of natural history and ease with nomenclature, as well as the poet's seemingly instinctive need to cross-reference and underscore the connectedness of things—botanical, musical, geological, political, manufactured, geographic. I think of the warblers and nuthatches she observed in Central Park, falcons she saw during retreats to coastal Maine, winged things she sought in books scattered across the Audubon Society's central offices. I think of the birds she dramatized in poems: "The Cormorant in Its Element" plummeting

waterward, big black feet splayed for a landing
gear, slim head turning and turning, vermilion-
strapped, this way and that, with a lightning glance
over the shoulder...

as well as the nightingales, peafowl, that "berry-/eyed, bark brown" thrush, the *Firebird* and "Bronx Zoo's exiled jungle fowl"—all of which appear in "The Kingfisher," an extraordinary poem that manages to link via its title image a failed romantic relationship with Igor Stravinsky, Wall Street, gray England, a Fifty-fifth Street pub, Dylan Thomas, and a "ruined nunnery."

Yet, of the many birds Clampitt catalogued in verse, it is *Catharus guttatus*—"A Hermit Thrush"—that remained her favorite, according to friend Mary Jo Salter, editor of the 2010 *Amy Clampitt: Selected Poems*. The poem, which originally appeared in 1987's *Archaic Figure*, the third of Clampitt's five full-length collections, takes as its subject a couple's annual pilgrimage to the site of a "low-tide-uncovered isthmus" for an ordinary picnic of "cucumber sandwiches" and "sea-air-sanctified / fig newtons." Although Clampitt is known for the dramatic power of her syntax and unabashed exploitation of complex rhetorical structures (throughout her oeuvre, the long one-sentence poem is signature), "A Hermit Thrush" commences with uncharacteristic assuredness and concision: "Nothing's certain." From this declaration the poem opens out, sprawling over nineteen quatrains to consider "our own prolonged attachment, holding." Such "attachment" suggests not only the couple's dedication to a particular place—that is, the isthmus with its "bust-beleaguered single spruce tree" and "the ant-thronged, root-snelled

moss, grass / edges frazzled raw”—but, more subtly, the commitment one person makes to another.

Although the speaker maintains “Whatever moral lesson might commend itself, / there’s no use drawing one,” the poem presses forward through the year’s “longest day” making one pronouncement after the next. Gradually, the poem trades its opening claim, “Nothing’s certain,” for a milder premise: “some few things seem nearly / certain.” However, it’s in the eighth stanza when Clampitt abandons the primarily declarative mode in favor of more intimate description that “A Hermit Thrush” takes a substantial dramatic turn. “Last night you woke me,” professes the speaker, “for a look at Jupiter, //

that vast cinder wheeled unblinking
in a bath of galaxies. Watching, we traveled
toward an apprehension all but impossible
to be held onto—

that no point is fixed, that there’s no foothold
but roams untethered save by such snells,
such sailor’s knots, such stays
and guy wires as are

mainly of our own devising. From such an
empyrean, aloof seraphic mentors urge us
to look down on all attachment,
on any bonding, as

in the end untenable ...

That Jupiter enters “A Hermit Thrush” via the poem’s second shortest sentence—a mere twenty words—is tactical: here, Clampitt exploits compression as a counterpoint to the stanzas’ longer units. This syntactic counterturn underscores the couple’s most private moment and allows for a significant emotional shift. What’s more, the characterization of “that vast cinder wheeled unblinking / in a bath of galaxies” echoes a similar move by Keats, whose admission “...then felt I like some watcher of the skies / when a new planet swims into his ken” brings his sonnet “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” to its emotional peak. Unlike Keats, however, whose ecstatic discovery is punctuated by contemplative stillness (like “stout Cortez,” Keats’s speaker looks “with

a wild surmise” and then falls utterly “Silent”), Clampitt considers the nature of that which is fixed versus that which is tenuous for another eight verbose quatrains.

In stark contrast to what precedes it, the poem’s final turn counters the accumulation of its preceding assertions. At the moment the speaker exactly concludes that “all attachment may prove at best, perhaps, / a broken, a much-mended thing,” a storm breaks open the penultimate sentence and the titular thrush at last enters the poem. At this point the couple abandons all verbal expression, “drop(ping) everything to listen” to the bird as it “distills its fragmentary / hesitant, in the end // unbroken music.” In the midst of such attentiveness, language itself dissolves until “there’s // hardly a vocabulary left to wonder.” Here, the practice of listening—an act of stillness and willful concentration running counter to the speaker’s vigorous mind—leads to revelation. Unlike the couple, the thrush is solitary, its expressions “so uninsistingly / not even human.” Further still, the very nature of the bird’s long-evolved, recurring notes contrasts the poem’s opening declaration, “Nothing’s certain.” Beyond rhetoric or speech, the thrush’s “unbroken music” triggers in the speaker a sense of newfound wonder. Such music facilitates the acknowledgment that however uncertain “we are of so much in this existence,” in the end, our “botched, cumbersome, much-mended” attachments are a “not unsatisfactory thing.”

So much of “A Hermit Thrush” is quintessential Clampitt: its “labyrinthine syntax” as characterized by Alfred Corn, the concentrated meditation on place from a pointillist-like vantage, as well as the poet’s vacillation between ordinary speech (i.e. the *single spruce tree* and *cucumber sandwiches*) and language some might consider baroque (*aloof seraphic mentors, thread of cinquefoil*). Musically, Clampitt is partial to compounds (*low-tide-uncovered, root-snelled, no-more-than-human, gust-beleaguered, much-mended*) and other repetitive patterns that include consonant-heavy diction such as *moss, grass, truffet, and frazzled*—all strung in quick succession. As is often the case in her poetry, “A Hermit Thrush” isn’t without humor; take, for instance, those “sea-air-sanctified / fig newtons.” Of Clampitt’s mind at work, Helen Vendler observes that “[her] thinking uncoils and coils again, embodying its perpetual argument with itself.” Certainly this is true of “A Hermit Thrush,” a poem in which the speaker begins with a central claim that is revised multiple times, and in the final stanza revisited and then reinstated in a

much more complicated way. Ultimately, the poem's tension arises from the speaker's complex feelings about what she knows best; that is, the paradox that there's really no knowing at all. Yet, for all the anxiety and grief this awareness might evoke—our geographic and most intimate connections are, after all, characterized as “botched, cumbersome, much-mended”—such understanding also elicits a sense of possibility. In *A History of Modern Poetry*, David Perkins describes Clampitt as “not a poet of penetrating single insights, but of lavish ongoingness,” a characterization substantiated by the duplicitous turns executed in “A Hermit Thrush.” Throughout her work, it is the fact that all *isn't* fixed that elicits degrees of resignation, but also redemption and joy.

“I really didn't mean to go on at such length about my own brand of nonconformity,” apologizes Clampitt in a 1955 letter to her brother, Philip, after expressing reservations about psychotherapy, the publishing industry, and her desire to live by choice in relative poverty. “I don't consider myself a rebel, but a small, oddly shaped, not quite dispensable buttress in the architecture of society.” Like the poet herself, the above self-characterization is delightfully strange. A committed wordsmith, Clampitt surely knew the origins of *buttress*—from the French “bouter,” to thrust against—as well as the word's multiple connotations as both a structural prop, and that bony protrusion stemming from a horse's hoof or tree. It's true that Clampitt was physically “small,” although apparently athletic. Approaching sixty, she describes “limbering up” via Yoga-like stretches with “pliés and relevés thrown in” before running a few miles with Hal “along the East River or...Central Park.” A lifelong admirer of the ballet, Clampitt was thrilled to be mistaken for a dancer at a New Year's Eve party in 1978. Thus, while her body was the image of grace, the poet's mind remained, quite thankfully for her admirers, “oddly shaped.”

Clampitt's quirkiness is evident in her Lenox home. Take, for instance, the eclecticism of her library. Throughout the house books abound. Scanning shelves, I find poetry anthologies and fiction by Edith Wharton, Henry James, and Alice Munro, as well as prose on Jupiter's moons, Antarctica, feral pigeons, and women in the Bible. *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield* rubs up against a guide to exploring vacant lots. Cat-shaped bronze bookends support an oversized encyclopedia. The wall decor is equally diverse. Clampitt's possessions include a pencil sketch of the Mount Desert Island coast

in Maine, illustrated plates of assorted birds, framed depictions of classical myths, a child's drawing of a brownstone fire escape, a poster gifted from Vendler featuring church windows in Ireland, an oil painting of a man wrestling a polar bear, and the watery landscape that would become the cover of her fourth collection, *Westward*.

Granted, the poet's eccentricities are not for everyone. I've heard readers complain about her erudite allusions and lexical excessiveness. A mentor of mine categorically dismisses her as *decorative*. In her essay "Against Decoration," Mary Karr describes Clampitt's "purple vocabulary" as "a parody of the Victorian silk that Pound sought to unravel." She also compares the poet with both "Swinburne on acid" and "Tennyson gone mad with his thesaurus." Karr isn't the only one to criticize Clampitt's shortcomings. In his introduction to *Love, Amy: The Selected Letters of Amy Clampitt*, Willard Spiegelman recounts an evening when, seated beside her at a dinner, James Dickey chastised Amy as that woman who writes "about flowers." Dickey's dismissal of Clampitt's writing comes as a surprise, particularly in light of his admiration for the work of Marianne Moore. In a 1966 *New York Times* review of *Tell Me, Tell Me: Granite, Steel, and Other Topics*, Dickey imagines Moore's version of heaven, speculating it

would have a means of recording objects and actions; it would have a history, and a way of preserving its discoveries and happenings: It would have books. But it would be, first of all, a realm of Facts... It would make possible vivid and creative and personal parallels between things, and conclusions unforeseeable until they were made. It would take forever from Fact the deadness of being only fact, for it would endow what Is with ... joyous conjunctions ...

Ironically, given Dickey's brush-off of Clampitt, the above could easily describe Clampitt's poetic strengths. Kindred to Moore—the pair has long been critically linked due to their appetites for classification and syntactic gusto—Clampitt is equally attentive to *things*. Among the poet's primary impulses is the need to meticulously characterize, whether the object at hand is natural or manufactured. In some cases, the two worlds collide as when, in "Beach Glass," a speaker searches for something beautiful among the shoreline's "driftwood and shipwreck, last night's / beer cans, spilt oil, the coughed-up residue of plastic." In

addition to abandoned “houses / of so many mussels and periwinkles,”
she discovers glass the color of

amber of Budweiser, chrysoprase
of Almadén and Gallo, lapis
by way of (no getting around it,
I’m afraid) Phillips’
Milk of Magnesia, with now and then a rare
translucent turquoise or blurred amethyst
of no known origin.

In the above stanza, readers once again witness Clampitt’s signature humor and self-mockery. Resisting the Romantic gesture, the poet describes the shards of glass by comparing them not only to gemstones like blue lapis and apple-green chrysoprase, but also to various shades of beer, boxed wine—even a creamy antacid. It is with juxtapositions like these that Clampitt joyously energizes the poem’s title image. While “Beach Glass” is playful, however, it also serves as an acclamation for more serious attentiveness:

The process
goes on forever: they came from sand
they go back to gravel,
along with the treasuries
of Murano, the buttressed
astonishments of Chartres,
which even now are readying
for being turned over and over as gravely
and gradually as an intellect
endangered in the hazardous
redefinitions of structures
no one has yet looked at.

If the above turn from sunken “gravel” and washed-up shards to Venetian glasswork—i.e., Murano’s glass beads and figurines—seems a logical step, certainly Clampitt’s leap to the windows of Paris’s Chartres Cathedral is surprising. This swift expansion in geography and scale allows Clampitt to create enough space to introduce the poem’s final metaphor. At this point “Beach Glass” announces itself not only as a

tribute to the beautiful water-worn fragments identified in its title, but also to intellectual capacity itself.

“Beach Glass” ultimately likens the human mind to an indefatigable sea whose primary task is to turn things “over and over.” Of the ocean, Clampitt claims “nothing / is beneath consideration.” The same might be said of the poet. For Clampitt, as is demonstrated in “Beach Glass,” even remnants are valued. As one critic notes, throughout her work a thing’s very presence becomes evidence of its value. Whether a word, object, place, or moment in time, one of Clampitt’s gifts is the ability to reveal the dazzling fact of what’s ordinary and often overlooked. And isn’t the ability to instill life into the world of facts what Dickey admires about Moore? *Beach glass-as-basalt-as-Budweiser beer-as-Venetian artifact-as-the buttressed astonishments of Chartres*: such connections underscore the mind’s ability to redefine and renew that which is immediately before it. Certainly this is the kind of writing Dickey praises: that is, poetry that “make[s] possible vivid and creative and personal parallels between things...and conclusions unforeseeable until they were made.”

In fairness to Dickey’s infamous comment at supper, Clampitt is inclined toward plants—and there’s plenty of flora to be found throughout her work. It’s also true that the poet is often recognized by her highly anthologized “The Sun Underfoot Among the Sundews,” a vertigo-inducing meditation on the “webwork of carnivorous rubies / a star-swarm thick as the gnats / they’re set to catch.” While readers of her *Selected Poems* will encounter a “Vacant Lot with Pokeweed,” “A Hedge of Rubber Trees,” and “Black Buttercups,” such tags can be misleading. Take for instance a poem like “The Dahlia Gardens,” whose title might suggest for some a leisurely stroll down rows of perennial heat-loving blooms. Instead, the poem narrates a young Quaker’s self-immolation near the Pentagon in protest of the Vietnam War. Clampitt’s “extravaganza / of a man afire” seizes the attention of “file clerks, secretaries, minor and major bureaucrats,” and works hard to dissolve the divisions between personal acts of protest and political events. By the end of “The Dahlia Gardens,” the residue of suffering coats freeways, lakes, airports—even the air itself—an image Clampitt uses to demonstrate that history’s “burning filament” runs “through all our chronicles.”

While a number of her poems tackle civil subjects, Clampitt’s correspondence makes clear the extent political activism played in her

personal life. For “lying as if dead for half an hour in front of the White House gate,” the poet was arrested, fingerprinted, and had her mug shot taken. In a letter dated “14 January, 1970,” she recounts travelling to the nation’s capitol to join the March of Death:

We got to Arlington cemetery around four a.m., and very soon had taken our names and candles and were making the four-mile hike across the Potomac and past the White House. It was freezing cold as it can be in Washington, and there was a wind like a knife of ice, but the marshals who were posted along the way, wrapped up in blankets and shivering but beaming, kept the mood buoyant above the solemnity. I was carrying the name of one Norman Livingston, of Michigan ... Hanging over us all was the possibility of tear gas and a stampede ...

One of the many gifts of *Love, Amy*, is the fact that Clampitt wrote the majority of its contents before becoming a public figure. As a result, her letters lack self-consciousness and reflect a life lived, versus one that’s either purposefully or inadvertently staged. Like the excerpt above, the bulk of Clampitt’s nineteen-seventies correspondence chronicles civic endeavors such as visiting her congressman and picketing corrupt landlords; she addresses her first letter of 1971 to Henry Kissinger. Very different in subject matter and tone are those exchanges written during the same period by poets already running in distinguished literary circles. Anne Sexton’s letters, for example, focus on the imminent publication and anticipated critical reception of her fairytale-centered collection, *Transformations*. James Wright advises Jack Myers about the possibility of authoring a book of poems about Richard Hugo. Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop exchange literary gossip, bemoan the difficulties of authoring prefaces, and offer critical feedback on each others’ work. Although the greater part of *Love, Amy* records life prior to publication, poetry is never far from Clampitt’s prose: nearly every exchange makes mention of some admired book or author. At one point, Clampitt even counsels her brother to “simply float around for awhile,” so long as he combines “the floating with some private project, such as reading every word somebody like Thoreau or Jane Austen or Milton or Shakespeare ever wrote.” Since some “discipline of specialization would be involved,” the poet pronounces, such an accomplishment would prove highly “satisfactory.”



What proves highly satisfactory about Clampitt's work is, in part, its exuberance. At a time when feigned disconnectedness and irony are poetic staples, it's refreshing to read a poet driven by feeling. Take for instance, the pleasure Clampitt exudes in a 1959 letter to her sister Beth:

This may sound most unlikely, but I swear it's true: there is a new tenant in my building whose name is Mary CRAMBLITT. You can imagine how confused the postman is by all this. Sometimes I get her mail, sometimes she gets mine, which we leave out for the other one to pick up. We haven't yet introduced ourselves—after all, to say “Miss Cramblitt, I am Miss Clampitt” or vice versa . . . but I know her when I see her, and she has a shaggy dog, just to make the whole thing unbelievable. Shaggy dog story, you know—if you know what one is, that is!

Light as its content may be, the “Cramblitt” anecdote reveals much about Clampitt's poetic temperament. As in the example above, no matter or moment—especially language-related—is too small to overlook as a potential source of joy. Perhaps Clampitt's inclination toward lexical bridgework comes in response to her ongoing sense of uprootedness. After all, she once labeled herself a “poet of displacement.” (“Nothing Stays Put” she insists in one title.) It's true that Clampitt's wanderings are often as geographical and historical as they are syntactical. Readers of *The Selected Poems* travel abroad via work set in Jerusalem, Bellagio, London, Venice, “George Eliot Country,” and “The Olive Groves of Thasos.” Stateside, Clampitt locates poems in New York, Maine, Virginia, Texas, and Washington D.C., among others. Time and again, she returns to her native Midwest.

The poem “Witness,” for example, finds the poet contemplating an “ordinary evening in Wisconsin / seen from a Greyhound bus—mute aisles / of merchandise the sole inhabitants / of the half-darkened Five and Ten...” Like much of Clampitt's work, “Witness” ends by underscoring “a mind bound elsewhere” and isn't the only poem to travel at night over the central plains. “A Procession at Candlemas” also makes a pilgrimage across the prairie by bus—that “bison of the highway—to visit the speaker's “mother / curtailed in Intensive Care.” Among her best elegies, “A Procession at Candlemas” also stands as one of Clampitt's barest in terms of diction and tone. Stripped of her signature ornamentation, the poem generates tension via the speaker's matter-of-factness: “Moving on or going back to where you came

from, / bad news is what you mainly travel with,” the speaker begins, “a breakup or a breakdown, someone running off // or walking out, called up or called home: / a death in the family.” Difficult as it is, familial loss isn’t a subject Clampitt shies from. In “Beethoven, Opus 111,” Clampitt elegizes her father by linking him via a series of verse paragraphs across geography and time to one of history’s greatest composers:

In the tornado country
of mid-America, my father
might have been his twin—a farmer
hacking at sourdock, at the strangle-
roots of thistles and wild morning glories,
setting out rashly, one October,
to rid the fencerows of poison ivy...

As unlikely as this pairing may seem—Clampitt’s Quaker father hoping to “set / his neighbors’ thinking straight” against the “stranglehold” of war, and the German genius “wrecked by repeated efforts to hear himself— / out of a humdrum squalor”—the poet manages to connect the two in spirit, painting both as rebellious, creative, hard-working, and simultaneously of the earth and air. Although “Beethoven, Opus 111” concludes with a musical crescendo that ushers in “the levitation / of serenity,” the poem’s more understated moments deliver pathos. Of her father’s attempt to uproot and cultivate a rare flower, Clampitt writes:

He mentioned in a letter the disappointment
of his having hoped it might transplant—
an episode that brings me near tears,
still, even as his dying does not—
that awful dying, months-long, hunkered
irascible...

“Beethoven, Opus 111” is particularly striking when compared with other parental elegies written by contemporary female poets. Although the speaker admits she is more affected by the story of her father’s horticultural failure than his “months-long” death, such a confession is far from the register of those seething father-daughter elegies by Plath, Sexton, or Sharon Olds. Clampitt’s paternal figure is neither oppressive nor abusive, but praiseworthy and even elevated to the level of artist via comparison to the poem’s musical protagonist. Although

Clampitt claims there's "no dwelling on the sweet past here," thanks to her imaginative pairing, readers feel fully all the bittersweet stirring of grief "somehow reconstituting / the blister shirt of the intolerable / into these shakes and triplets."

One of my last nights in Lenox, poet Karen Chase and her husband, the artist Paul Graubard, stop by for drinks. It was Karen, a longtime friend who first met Clampitt when she was awarded a Rockefeller Foundation Residency in Bellagio, who first scouted the cottage on Neilsen Lane for Amy and Hal. In the living room accented with brass objects and blue glass, we make our introductions and toast before the fire. Karen is particularly tickled to see the gold-rimmed whisky tumblers rescued from some cabinet's darker recesses. *We spent many nights drinking from these*, she confesses before launching into a melody of tales about Amy, Hal, and the house. We talk and laugh as dusk fills with scattered details: Clampitt's dime-store purchases and adventures in junking; the backstory on a hand-painted dresser given to the poet by an ex-fiancé; the source of the barrister bookcase and French antique chair; what happened when Hal's mother, Hattie, came to stay.

Karen tells us about cleaning the cottage after Amy died, sorting out papers and a trunk packed with the poet's swimsuits. She shares some details about Clampitt's illness—how Hal retreated to his office to listen to Classical music for hours on end in an effort to cope with his grief, and the point at which they moved Amy's hospice bed in front of two oversized dining room windows so that she could watch her favorite birdbath and feeders. Although it doesn't name the ovarian cancer that took her life, the posthumously published "Pot Nomads" sheds some insight on that time. "Left unwatered while I / gallivanted elsewhere, / they'd languish," the speaker confesses, "the tough / green warty leaf-rosettes / would droop and then, repeatedly, / revive..." Over the course of the poem, the plants cycle through a series of near-death misses and revivals only to be nearly forgotten by their caretakers. Moving swiftly from spring to summer and then to fall, "Pot Nomads" concludes with a burial of sorts

...in October—windfalls
thick in the grass, a glory inhabiting
each of a thousand maples—a feeble
grubbing at late weeds uncovered

three stubborn leaf-rosettes, greenly
 holding on. Hothouse origins behind
 them, travels over, roofed under
 by a thatch of mulch, a hood of snow,
 out there, will they (I shiver, thinking)
 make it through the winter?

The speaker's real question, of course, is *will I?* Clampitt did, in fact, survive the season and died in September 2004. Hal placed her ashes beneath a beech tree in the couple's backyard.

There are two photos of Clampitt that speak volumes to me about her spirit, as well as her poetics: the first hangs in the room where she died. Dressed in a button-up wool jacket, she has shoulder-length hair with strait-cut bangs and appears twenty-something, thirtyish at best. The image is from Clampitt's early years on New York's West Twelfth Street when she'd pass "practically every lunch hour" scouring art galleries and museums, and evenings scuttling between social gatherings and the ballet. Seated, she's intensely focused on an open book; the book is thick—she's only a few pages in. The woman in this photo is intellectually ambitious, completely consumed by what she's reading. The other photo is a portrait of Clampitt late in life, an author's head shot credited to ThomasVictor. In it, Clampitt gazes up and out of frame. Is the poet smiling or laughing? Are her hands clasped or clapping? The answers to such questions—impossible to know—matter not: Clampitt registers pure elation.

It's by chance my last morning in Lenox that I read "Amherst," an epistolary poem addressed from one admiring author to another as a gesture of fellowship and understanding. "I thought of writing her," admits the speaker somewhat late in the poem, "(Dear Emily, though, / seems too intrusive, Dear Miss Dickinson too prim)." I, too, think of writing something to express my gratitude for Clampitt's work—in particular, poems like "What the Light Was Like," "An Anatomy of Migraine," and "The Kingfisher"—and for the time I've spent in this place, but fall short. Instead, I take a small box of beach glass from the nightstand beside my bed and remove its contents. Cleaning the water-worn shards piece by piece, I think about what I might say to the poet who once lived and wrote here. *Dear Miss Clampitt*, I begin, but then stop to correct myself, *Dear Amy ...*

Dear Amy, I don't know where I am. I've been kidnapped and am being held prisoner by a strange man. I'm afraid he'll kill me. Her advice column, Dear Amy, gets all kinds of letters - but none like the one she's just received: Dear Amy, I don't know where I am. I've been kidnapped and am being held prisoner by a strange man. I'm afraid he'll kill me. Aimee Nezhukumatathil, "Dear Amy Nehzooukammyatootill" from Lucky Fish. Copyright © 2011 by Aimee Nezhukumatathil. Reprinted by permission of Tupelo Press. Source: Lucky Fish (Tupelo Press, 2011). More About this Poem. Related. Audio. Play Episode. Dear Amy Nehzooukammyatootill Dear-amy poems from famous poets and best dear-amy poems to feel good. Most beautiful dear-amy poems ever written. Read all poems for dear-amy. Read Dear Amy poem. Dear Amy - we all know how you feel - but honestly, to help you we're just not able - 'cus we're all still - well - much the same; just hiding behind a designer label. Dear Amy. Michael Shepherd. Comments about Dear Amy by Michael Shepherd. There is no comment submitted by members.. Dear-amy Poems. 1. Dear Amy Michael Shepherd.