

THE BIG FLAWED HEART    POEMS AFTER MIDDLEMARCH    KRISTAL LANGUELL



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# THE BIG FLAWED HEART

## POEMS AFTER *MIDDLEMARCH*

KRYSTAL LANGUAGELL



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# INTRODUCTION

Summer is a time for reading long books, and in 2015 I pulled a dusty copy of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* off my shelf hoping to get lost. I'd had the book since I lived in Indiana, where I'd salvaged it from a friend's donate pile. This was my first attempt at reading it.

While I read, I wrote a series of untitled, lineated poems lacking punctuation, each responding to a range of pages. In part, I wrote to retain hold of the plot, cataloging the contents of my mind at the end of a day or two, to look at how my brain was processing the information. Perhaps writing the poems was also a way to stay inside the book, to reduce the number of hours during which I had to live in reality. I was a bit discombobulated. The same summer was the end of my year in the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council workspace program, so I'd had to move my books and rugs and crafting supplies home where there wasn't much space for them. I misplaced my vintage iron with a cloth-wrapped cord. How do you lose an iron?

By repackaging the plot of a classic long novel into anecdotal, contemporary language, I created a reading journal that reflects the state of active engagement in negotiation with a torrent. How does a mind store and then recall knowledge? Does it look very different for every person? What does it look like for me?

The poems' commentary on the novel's representation of provincialism as a lifestyle and obstacle is consistent with my other work, which documents exploitative labor models and toxic family structures. I read (someplace in the morass of the internet) someone (probably more

than one someone) calling New York City, and its poetry community in particular, provincial, and this was of special intrigue to me while I lived there. Because it doesn't just mean an enclave cut off from richer culture or taller buildings: rather, provincialism is also represented by the mindset that states, "I have everything I need right here, why would I ever leave?" It's a lack of curiosity, and that's puzzling and fascinating.

Eliot's novel does not need my poetic CliffsNotes revision. The point isn't to fix anything about the book, nor to make it more accessible to a particular audience, but rather to document the mechanics of the act of reading, a bit like Lisa Robertson's work in *Nilling*. I would hope only that readers will appreciate how the quotidian concerns and basic mistakes of these characters resonate with our own concerns and mistakes since, as far as I can see, we haven't yet solved the questions of money and love and how much is too much to ask of each other.

# THE BIG FLAWED HEART

the study of a character  
where individual ethic surfaces  
it's the unaccustomed depth  
where fervor is lived  
it's solitude in imagination  
planning the perfect crime but  
never intending to actually do it  
the unclarity of lacking a boss to please  
with any gesture of pure work  
be love in every word  
the mantra extracted from careful observation  
constant non-performance  
did Aristotle say something  
about trying repeatedly even overcompensating  
for known inadequacies  
or was that a less ancient  
the idea relies on binaries of good & evil  
anyway  
does the slippage fall back down into hate then  
if ideas are basic seesaw simple machine combo  
a wedge and a lever  
a tool  
say yes to requests  
for favors or borrowing  
share with anybody  
without judgment  
unless  
as is sometimes the case  
the truth tells itself and is not pretty

is someone else falling short of  
being love manifest  
motto not mantra  
channeling energy  
to a person in need of invisible  
support against an obstacle  
it is vague and it will continue  
on the same path of not your business  
as long as your mind is closed  
to magic  
if you want to be a witch  
you must relent  
abandon the reflex that first sight  
tells you anything true at all

going about a quickly  
invented errand to improve  
his chances  
a man may make an error  
in judgment with no friend  
witnessing against hasty  
horse trading  
you know men will trade  
horses as long as there are  
horses still around  
trotting or cantering  
having speculative value  
the imagination left  
to itself is drunk on perfume  
is in gridlock traffic  
so owing an apology  
is a special pain  
what crow  
what defeat is this  
a bulky pack  
no end to unpleasant surprise  
must reorient the rogue mind  
off thinking its own  
important thoughts  
all full with rectitude  
wonderland of  
obstacles  
what C. S. Lewis had to say  
about salt

how if you told an alien  
we put it on everything  
they'd be repulsed  
at our lack of sense

the glances at rival brocade  
belie the seriousness of bringing  
a matter to one's attention  
which unchecked may further  
limit one's future happiness  
to an individual with a single purpose  
what else can come to mind  
her own flirtation bloats  
and what explodes or what relents  
in response to her waggle of fingertips  
true the setting is provincial but  
the families don't feel small to  
themselves or their bank president  
impulse toward gain  
softening of ideology  
a few teardrops fall and it's decided  
wake up on time and practice a hobby  
a drama of manners where no one  
is rude quite apart from differing opinion  
factions exist but tempers are mild  
men's health however enters unclarity  
he must not be made anxious in the  
slightest a task put to a girl to enforce  
who has weighty anxieties already that  
must now become secret and how will  
keeping secrets suit her  
charge of protection  
to keep watch of a strange stuffy man  
she'll keep the task



and the men's sensitivities will all outgrow  
a certain couch in a certain room  
with dust motes in what light gets in  
full of unread books she'll curse the full  
contents of the house before long  
to an eye dead to collars and ornament  
a heart wanting a worthy of depth

give the mourners ham and veal  
while the master lies in his bedrest  
men seated in the kitchen with their  
googly eyes on the girl keeping them  
fed on master's pantry  
waiting for the fatal blow  
blood entitles the guests to dine on  
whatever stores the property contains  
and the young layabout also ill and  
the aged scholar husband also ill  
gloom persists  
he states he has made his will  
and swipes with his gold-handled  
cane at the intruders  
has a man a right to swing at his blood  
undocumented how he acquired property  
yet depth of detail on ethic of girl  
preparing death feasts for cousins et cetera  
asks the wrong mother for advice  
nature of provinciality  
word is deed and only so few chances  
the doctor considered kind of a laborer  
not as desirable as the big landowners for  
marriage material  
provincial overlaps much with superrich  
in cities just fewer books and worse cut  
of trousers or jib

about the engagement  
the father says the doctor is  
a poor man  
the doctor buys a dinner service  
it's quite expensive  
but he thinks since you only buy it  
once & does not consult his  
dear in this domestic task  
so eager to rush the wedding to  
get through it men keep imagining  
that marriage will calm her  
& then they can get back to work  
science or philosophy research with  
the benefit of the limit to womanly  
education just enough to keep busy  
in the house ready with affection &  
music at any moment in short trained  
for servitude without selfhood as if  
this matched the girl each engaged himself  
to but maybe they think opinions solely  
come for wedding party details and a bit  
the honeymoon itinerary what's the big  
deal he thinks a bunch of nonsense yet  
the order of things is resultant and its  
inverse you see completely reliant on  
family mores of an ethic the boy's gone  
quite pale as he'd made plans to do nothing  
the timeline is set by tradition and rut

comes from wear which is confirmation  
that one who wishes to alter the course finds  
himself alone in the tall grass of a moment

the time for her ideas was on the  
matter of wallpaper and linens  
she asks permission to speak  
is often told that's the last of it  
to build safe cottages or advise  
on what's fair and righteous better  
suits her but now the man's health  
is brought in for a reason to value  
his thoughts as superior spare him  
the stress of disagreement  
the type that won't notice her loss  
of vim appreciate the silence  
accompanying her while she is serious  
no music or ornament as with most  
women she wants to read and be  
of use to the world what opportunities  
does he imagine he affords her  
how long must she be grateful for  
her boring honeymoon spent touring  
art and architecture site and another  
how fortunate that she be young and  
formidably unsilly yet before long he'll  
wish he had a stupid bride or none at all  
instead of this unusual figure  
gritting her teeth minding her inner life

the scholar determines who is welcome  
visitor to his landholdings and table  
lets his mood flip in the face of non-ideal  
news imagines himself a kind of king  
on what grounds must he be obeyed is it  
the purity of his blood aristocratic destiny  
doesn't want a cousin so far below him  
it offends him deeply to what end must  
a record of his injured feelings be kept  
he is rich it's confirmed and all his tenants  
live in safe comfortable cottages with no  
squalor whatsoever sometimes the thought  
of women married to rich old men is enough  
to cry about a perfect squalor of inner life  
what depth is possible when all is either whisper  
or palliative nursing so the job is to wait for  
his death which is a mean small hope pray  
you don't die in childbirth before you can enjoy  
what he's left you unless he too is a secretive  
petty old crank who wishes to see you faint  
at his coffin when you learn you'll be going to  
stay with uncle somebody he gets the last laugh  
that's how this has always worked

good news inspires the big flawed heart  
to make plans for sharing income prior  
to official agreement contract  
if terms shift out of speculation into say  
an unpaid internship wife unit  
will bop his nose certainly while  
daughter who was called an old brick  
by a child would be redisappointed too  
trust of a good letter come by post  
what of the other seven letters for father  
that day a noon meeting proposed  
did he remember to send his reply or  
was the idea misfiled into a drafts folder  
in new workplaces too we make mistakes  
wonder what will these people think  
it's nervous to see others flinging trust  
around as if it were infinite and ready  
what if we only have a little what if we  
go hungry for it later and wish differently

it shifted into a different house  
and then a new set of concerns  
it was just yesterday  
the husband asked the doctor  
what was really wrong with him  
the husband is very distrustful  
suspects his wife of wrong motives  
the journalist nephew of designs  
on the wife seems to be cooking up  
some adjustments to his will  
as predicted in these pages  
few characters in the plot in pursuit  
of doing good for humankind  
not so much aware that such a  
phenomenon exists just a self and  
a few acquaintances a few officials  
that lucky dad who has been at work  
for causes and not pay wants to help  
the layabout rich boy but really should  
keep his attention on his own several  
children he is the big  
heart in town who gives it all away mister  
set a little imaginary income aside  
nonetheless

on the topic of medical advice  
blistering is a common treatment  
when physicking falls short  
the pills a fertile mother takes to  
get through a busy month of baking  
the brown rather than pink recipe  
has worked for years a tumor they  
might want cut but first it's manners  
among doctors offense his patient  
cured better by a younger man better  
because the servant was no longer sick  
and with no cutting into her others  
from the brink of death some say  
unnaturally no autopsy practice in  
place the young doctor thinks aloud  
of graverobbing historical figures  
to his wife's disgust who says no  
misery please for us make discoveries  
without upsetting people they have  
a little consumer debt having rushed  
the wedding the banker built the new  
hospital though a low profession  
other bodies' fluids and temperaments  
says wife she is opposed to muck & bile

a second time a young woman refuses  
to obey a man and he's dead by morning  
"by" in this case stretches to include the  
period of hours prior to his expiration  
slumped over a picnic table in his cape  
frantic work and the next chapter  
skips ahead weeks a woman in grief  
what does she do how is it different than  
sitting in her room with a few books  
and a window would be hard to notice  
his absence no one passing her a note  
about what room to eat her dinner in  
next marker will be the day to open  
his desk someone interprets the will at  
her its codicil appended to exert control  
from the grave who'll never receive a  
portion of the wealth the only person  
she had spoken up for to split the land

romance came about during illness  
in the mayor's house anyone left  
unsupervised might fall in love  
the unmarried meet each other  
then forget their oaths to self one  
bride had a boy baby the doctor's  
wife miscarried horseback riding  
knocked her fetus loose still he  
could not be angry with her now  
she has sneaked that they might  
not sell the house to her ex-suitor  
and she not admitting simply  
her humiliation instead she meddles  
in business unlike her unlike a lady  
to begin a foray into meeting agents  
provincial how she writes to relatives  
thinks only of the men's opinion of her  
appearance not considering the ladies  
might not want her around much  
plaits a nuisance vanity can be called  
another name depends on the context  
surface or aesthetics labor is another  
the mayor's pretty daughter thinks men  
will invite her to live on family land  
she wishes they would move to London

after she said she wished she'd died  
with the baby mister doctor went to  
the gambling house to see a man about  
some business and began betting at cards  
and winning for a time but embarrassing  
himself when spendthrift brother-in-law  
arrived himself a bit in shame a man of  
pleasures and called him away to another  
meeting he could compose himself shake  
off the spell brother gets a warm advice but  
doctor is alone in his affairs might be that  
bank president will ask him to do away with  
the alcoholic troublemaker now holed up  
on his property there would be some  
money in that for him while banker yet  
worries himself ill considers moving his wife to  
the next town over to hide wealth got from others'  
losses making loans and pawning for the desperate  
predatory indeed he absorbed the widow's holdings  
on her death even as he knew her daughter was  
living he sensing the end would do well to indulge  
a loan to the poor doctor seeing how stress of  
protecting his wealth is killing him is it habit that  
prevents his generosity he says his wife's family has  
borrowed large sums of his it is their extravagant  
educations that accustom them to a life failing to  
also acquire skills or business to afford their tastes  
are quite outside their budget yet they cast about for  
reasons would the boy have earned like they hoped in  
the clergy as he would find need of for his own family

not much going right anymore  
villain dispatched victim fancies  
himself passive though he's arranged  
the man's expiration aggressively  
while no one of consequence looked  
on the respite brief since rascal'd  
already told the secret all over as he  
was a drunk and one cannot trust  
a drunk to silence gave the opium and  
the brandy and covered it up opposing  
medical views provide alibi one man  
knew and it was known but did he plan  
to kill him his land agent as well novels  
make plain evil once indulged doesn't  
relent in its appeal consequences expose  
the wrongdoing only inasmuch as it  
cannot go on replicating itself without  
incurring severe punishment or why  
check power banker is elderly popular  
opinion was against him anyway but  
now it's turned out of hand his heart  
cannot cycle his breath in regular puffs  
collapse at town meeting melodrama  
but at seventy perhaps the man just dies

no one else died and the kids got  
married like they wanted to after  
finally admitting they felt love in  
each other's company all only once  
she set aside her misery having slept  
on the floor in her gown sobbing  
returned to her rival to still set right  
the matter of debts and rumors which  
seemed to her total injustice she spoke  
for the doctor volunteered to intercede  
in repair to his reputation as an honest  
man and true even her solutions work  
every time they benefit others such was  
her religion in practical terms despite  
her perception that her own lover held  
this wife's hands to his mouth and pulled  
away in shame when she entered letter in  
her hand to explain how she'd fix some  
element of their ruin dropped the letter on  
the desk and walked out to sob at home  
all her interest faded away and yet plot had  
her return to finish her favor and unfold  
of consequences led to epilogue marriage  
she did give up all the land to be with him  
the formerly idle painter the spurned heir

KRYSTAL LANGUAGELL lives in Chicago. She is the author of two books, *Call the Catastrophists* and *Gray Market*, and five chapbooks, including a collection of interviews, *Archive Theft* (Essay Press, 2015). A NYSCA/NYFA 2017 Artist Fellowship Finalist in Poetry, she previously completed a Lower Manhattan Cultural Council workspace residency in 2014-15 and a Poetry Project Emerge-Surface-Be fellowship in 2013-14. Since 2010, she has helped coordinate the activities of Belladonna\* Collaborative while publishing the feminist poetry journal *Bone Bouquet*. She was an adjunct in New York City for seven years.





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