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Madison, Wisconsin: Parallel Press, 2009

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One Hundred Small Yellow Envelopes

POEM BY

James Crews



PARALLEL PRESS

A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K

One Hundred Small Yellow Envelopes

Poem by
James Crews



Parallel Press
University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries
728 State Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53706
<http://parallelpress.library.wisc.edu>

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ISBN: 978-1-934795-09-5

I would like to express thanks to the editors of *Prairie Schooner* for publishing several of these pieces and to the Bernice Slote Emerging Writers Award, whose financial assistance could not have come at a better time. This work is also indebted to several monographs, which provided invaluable information about the art and life of Gonzalez-Torres, including *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, edited by William S. Bartman (A.R.T. Press, 1993) and *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, edited by Julie Ault (Steidl Publishers, 2006). I would like to also recognize the many people who gave these pieces tender, thoughtful readings at their early stages: Ron Wallace, Heather Swan, Cole Kearney, Kim Hays, Stella Nelson, Jesse Lee Kercheval, and Judy Mitchell. And immeasurable gratitude goes to David Clewell, who (as usual), had a much better idea.

For Patrick, no matter

Note

Parts of this chapbook are based upon the life and work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957–96), a Cuban-born minimalist artist known for his simple installations and sculptures. Many have seen his work not only as a commentary on the AIDS epidemic but also as a meditation on how the disease affected his longtime lover, Ross, who passed away in 1991. The poem is spoken by Felix, unless otherwise noted. The story of Felix and Ross is drawn from actual biography and from the art itself.

This work originated from my fear of losing everything. This work is about controlling my own fear.

—Felix Gonzalez-Torres

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1. (Proof)

Lift your lover's shirt from under the bed, as if from memory. Bring it to your lips and the night returns: home after heavy drinking to forget, and you wouldn't go in. You leaned against the steps as he held you. Watched the other buildings sleep except the one next door: a breath of steam flowed out of the basement window toward you both—someone drying clothes. *Time to go in*, he must have said. Instead, you inhaled the steam until its sick-sweet scent stuck in your throat. The dusk-till-dawn buzzed above you, lit him so bright, all you saw was the white of his shirt. You fell, held onto his jacket and pressed your lips against that white. *I don't want it to end*, you said into it.

Turn the shirt over and over in your hands. Brush off the dust and let your heart almost burst when you find the small, yellow stain—his come—still on it. Recall an old black-and-white photo in which a man and his girl sit on the edge of a bed together. He smirks at the camera as if he can't believe his luck, and she crushes her lips so hard against his cheek, he has to lean into the sunlight stretching through the window toward him. Across this photo, however, the words: *This is my proof*—what you've always assumed meant his loss. Hold the T-shirt, imagine the man alone in bed after she's gone, coming across the photo again. Because he knows the light—so white it can erase—will never fill the room the same, he takes out a pen and writes it. Put on your lover's shirt—dust, stain and all—and say it: *This is my proof*.

2. (Total Eclipse)

Spotlights on endless bodies, on tanned men, on drag queens' made-up faces, white-hot light spinning on biceps, on skin-tight T-shirts, on lips dripping into song, bodies fused on the dance floor, leaving drinks, spilling drinks, abandoned cup of beer spilling golden at this man's feet, leaning into his drink, sucking ice, breathing smoke swirling thick between us, between songs, between the squint of the queen stepping onstage and the bat of her lashes, lip-syncing "Total Eclipse of the Heart," lacquered-red fingernail calling me, calling him, bodies moving to the same voice, same song, same light of the queen's *And I need you now tonight*, eyes closed, *And I need you now more than ever*, her arms reaching out, *And if you'll only hold me tight*, stepping through the spotlights' slow dance toward him, his body, his mouth now close to my ear, his *I'm Ross*, hand on my shoulder, *We'll be holding on forever*, dance floor clearing, new song, new beat, bodies close, bodies of no shirts, bodies aglow, sweat of the song, sweat of the dance, sweet of the light we let go into the bathroom, into the mirror we kiss against, into the unzip, heartbeating bass, beat of the mouth, beat of the hand, beat of the hard, beating heart of his *Yes, yes*, blinding light of last call, edging out blind into Sunday's new light, heat of the sunrise, heat of his hand in mine, heat of *Nothing I can say* but his name—Ross—again and again as we step over a broken bottle so hot with light it might melt before I can take him home.

3. (*City of Gold, City of Salt*)

Finally, a man I was willing
to follow down these streets, still slick
with last night's possibility as we came
to the flaking sign—*Salt Depot*—
where Ross opened the rusted gate,
pointed up at the mountains
and mountains of salt New York stores
for winter. First light caught
on them until they all shone
like the lost city of gold
Coronado spent half his life trying
to find. We climbed one of the mounds,
looked out across this city. Falling
down, we lay on gold, on flawless salt.

4. (*The Gold Field*)

Wandering through the museum today, Ross and I came upon a piece called *The Gold Field*, a slice of sunlight installed in its own white room. We memorized it, this blanket made of real gold foil, still creased as if from its last body. It was the rectangle of yellow when Ross pulled up the shade this morning. Was each small plot of scorched grass at the cemetery in San Juan where my mother brought me each month. *Never step there*, she said once, pointing at my foot that had come to rest on a pile of fresh dirt.

The sculpture didn't need words. It lifted us above the jobs, the small rented rooms, the small minds. I leaned in, as close as I could get without touching it just to be near its heat. I put my hand on his shoulder, wanted to curl up with him right there on the floor and rest. Every sunrise and sunset from now on, I thought, will spread this field of golden light across the bed as we wake up together.

5. (*Wawanaisa Lake: Ross*)

Before he was awake, I walked out to the deck. The sun spilled itself onto the lake. Fish nipped at the clear air above them as if to get a taste of what we keep breathing in so deeply each morning. In the dim of five a.m., their tiny risings to the surface looked like hundreds of invisible men skipping stones, making wishes.

But no one was stirring that early, so I went down to the beach, took off everything. I eased into the icy water, which drank the length of my body like liquid mercury, thick and silver. I swam toward one of the dams, which stretched at least a hundred feet across the lake. Two beavers glided through the water toward what I thought must be their lodge. Small, cone-shaped, it leaned against the bank—sticks, mud and rocks packed together precisely. I almost went back, dragged Felix out of bed to see it. But stayed, floating there. Wondering how many seasons it would last.

When I slipped back into the cabin, I slid between the cool sheets, fell asleep against his chest. All the scents of this place—evergreen, cedar and rich loam—filling us, leaving us.

6. (*Wawanaisa Lake*)

The cedars and firs spread their shade
like a gauze across the earth.
The lake shone silver in the distance,
its cold filling the air, chilling me
to the bone. I was shivering
by the time I stopped at a pile
of needles and leaves. Two skulls—
what looked like coyote—lay
half-buried, side by side. Empty
sockets looked up, as if pleading.
I took off my jacket, meaning
to wrap them up and take them
home. But when I knelt down,
there were femurs and ribs:
two entire skeletons intertwined.
I came back empty-handed,
into the bedroom where he lay
still sleeping. I tugged the sheets,
kissed his forehead slow and sweet,
but when he wouldn't move,
I tore off his briefs, shoved him
deep in my mouth. Even let my teeth
scrape skin until he woke up,
both hands trying to lift me.
He finally opened his eyes,
watched me finish him off.
I couldn't stop.

7. *(Nowhere Better Than This Place)*

I picked dead petals from the irises in their wine bottle vase. Outside the window: my own slice of sky, and the sun—a small, bright fist—sending light through the green bottle, against the flowers, and into the blue walls of the kitchen, which soaked it up and gave it back. Ross walked in wearing last night's sheets, and we sat down, sipped our thick, Turkish coffee out of chipped mugs. I slid *The Times* out of its plastic.

Today, the black-and-white faces looked back: waxen Reagan and Koop offering little or nothing more than, *Tenfold Increase in Death Toll Expected*. I couldn't keep reading. I folded it up and went to the corner where we've been saving the old newspapers, stacked waist-high, like proof. I started to stuff them into the trashcan, one by one, until he came up from behind, stopped me. *Won't do any good*, he said.

And his word—*good*—stretched its arms around my neck. *What can we do?* I might have asked, but I already knew the answer: you follow this blue to the one you love. Right there, among those stacks and stacks of paper, you undo the sheets wrapped around him like one long bandage, slowly. You trace the veins of his arms with your mouth to their source: *Nowhere better than this place*. And write it on his bare chest—*home*.

8. (*Letter to Felix: Ross*)

For Keats too, it started with sore throats,
fevers. What appeared to be *mere cold*
wound tighter in his chest. That night
at Brown's, after only the slightest
cough, he saw it: a single drop
of red on the bedsheets. *Bring me*
the candle, he said. *Let me see this.*
His eyes were glass in the dim light
but clear: *I know the color*
of that blood, he said, then fell
into the dream of writing a letter
to Fanny Brawne, the paper slipping
into the ground instead of her hands—
everything he'd ever meant to say
but had saved and saved for later.

9. (*Perfect Lovers*)

Our bodies moved like two ticking clocks:
not sick, not sick, not sick—

10. *(The Raising of Lazarus)*

T-cell counts up. A miracle, they called it, promising to send him home again. But it was nothing we could hold. We asked to go out into the real light, and I led him by the arm down buzzing corridors, through the automatic doors. He squinted against the day at first: mica-glint jumping up from the sidewalks close enough to catch; metal- and glass-shine bouncing off parked cars, giving us back the sun.

He took off the robe, undid a string on the gown he was still wearing. He bared a shoulder and closed his eyes, leaning into the light and began to give up the hospital-shadow that grows over the outline of every patient's bones. Silence floated up between us like the blur of heat rising from blacktop.

When it was time to go back in, we took it slow. Swaddled in their white again, Ross stopped short of the doors. He looked like Giotto's Lazarus standing outside his tomb: the linen of his death shroud still binding him, reminding him.

11. (Golden)

I lay out by the pool, next to the calla lilies cupping the sun like champagne, waiting for Ross to change. The sliding glass doors flashed—slabs of solid gold—then opened: he stood in his extra-small trunks but in front of the doors the borders of his body blurred into shine. *Let's see that dive*, I said. He stretched at the pool's edge, arced his arms to a point. Then stopped.

A line of piss was running down the side of his leg. He kicked at our chairs, tore at the lilacs and callas. I had him in my arms in no time. He pushed me, but I wrapped the towel around his trunks. *I wish*, he said to my shushing. We sat down on the concrete, dipped our toes in the water until I dragged both of us into the pool. We flailed, found each other smiling underwater and stayed there. The sun wove its golden threads around our eyes, and, like the strands of a beaded curtain, the light parted for us. We held our breaths.

12. *(Lover Boys)*

I showered with Ross this morning, worked lather into his skin until it was as pink as taffy. We got out, towed each other off, my favorite part. He stepped onto the scale holding onto the wall for support and saying words to himself I'd think were prayers if I didn't know better. But I got on with him this time, our two wet bodies one weight, numbers going crazy until they stayed at 355. *We're fat*, I said.

He tried to keep down toast and eggs but that face: same as the night I'd stopped by the corner store on my way home for cheap Merlot and my favorite candy—which he hated—a bag of black licorice snaps. That face when I took out a piece, unwrapped the silver cellophane, but he opened his mouth anyway and I put it in. His eyes squinting, cheeks sucked in. *Here*, he said, drew me close and pushed the wet licorice into my mouth.

This evening when we finally made love again, it was so good I fell asleep after. I dreamed our blankets and sheets were an endless spill of licorice—355 pounds of it—falling from the wall, all I could eat.

13. *(Estimations: Ross)*

I counted the minutes
until Felix was sleeping,
opened up the refrigerator
and used its light to find
my needle kits and pill bottles.
I spread them on the table,
like a magician with his tricks—
Ziagen, Emtriva, Videx,
Mepron, Trizivir, Zerit.

Losing, says the scale.
Any change? he asked this morning
pushing the plate toward me.
I shook my head no.
If I confuse the numbers—
weight, how many, how much—
it almost, almost adds up.

When I was done,
nausea sawing through me,
I looked at the bowl
of blackberries on the counter—
the last from the yard.
In a matter of hours I knew
I'd wake him, make him
eat every last one of them,
their juice already a bruise
on my lips.

14. (*Aparicion*)

This morning, in a blur of orange
and gray, a robin landed
in our blackberry bush.

He pecked and pushed
what was left until he freed
a fat berry we'd forgotten to pick.

He took it gingerly in his beak
and spread his wings.
I half-expected it—overripe—

to burst before he lifted off,
but it didn't. He knew
something about *gentle*, about *relish*.

He drifted up into piled clouds,
a further blur except for
the tuft of orange on his chest.

He was a speck against the gray
of hidden sun. He was gone.

15. *(Fan Letter)*

I went to your exhibit last night,
saw the installation where you'd taken
your own weight and your lover's
before he'd died of AIDS and made
the pile of silver licorice snaps
that matched the 355 pounds exactly.

I loved the way the candy
spilled from the corner of two white walls
and I was about to walk away
when the guard explained that the artist
asked that everyone take a piece with him.
I thanked her but said I couldn't,
didn't want to ruin all your hard work.

Later on, after I'd left the gallery,
I stood outside to get one last look
when I saw a man bent over your sculpture
popping piece after piece in his mouth
chewing and sobbing.

I want to tell you that
if I could go back now, I'd take
as much of the licorice with me as I could.
I'd do exactly what you wanted.

16. *(Bedroom, After)*

Sunlight edged into my eyes,
made tiny orbs beside our pillows,
each still imprinted
as if we'd just lifted our heads,

or some ghost had come in,
pressed his fist into each one
and then left the sheets
rumpled on the bed

like clothes he'd given up.
I want to lie there all day,
bury my face
in the sheets and pillows,

blame the bed
for hoarding your warmth,
keeping this impression
of your body all to itself.

I want to tear it all to shreds
with my teeth and nails.
I want to resist the urge
for as long as I can.

And then give in.

17. (*Orpheus, Twice*)

I awoke this morning to Beethoven playing on the turntable. My hand went to your side of the bed, to your pillow—but nothing. I let my eyes adjust to the dim room, tried to find you. Finally: a flash of sunlight in the mirror, and your naked silhouette standing in front of it. *Come back to bed*, I said. But you kept staring into the silver skin of your reflection as if, transfixed by the music, you wouldn't move. Or couldn't.

Tonight, I dug through the crates of LPs, must have played a hundred before it came back—"Quartet in C Sharp Minor." I thought it would make this easier. I undid my jeans as the sounds of strings filled the room, sat down in front of the mirror: only this body, heavy five o'clock shadow, my own eyes. I closed them. I let the music guide me, guide me, until I almost had your mouth, hand, and body again. It was no use. I looked: no you.

18. *(One Hundred Small Yellow Envelopes)*

Tonight was your last wish.
I used a teaspoon to scoop you
into each of the yellow envelopes
you chose and addressed to our friends.

I worked all night, watched what everyone
insists on calling your *cremains*
fall into the mouths of the envelopes,
some of the ash as fine as sugar,
other bits as coarse as salt.

I don't know what to do
with the one marked, *Felix*.
I want to rip it open
like a packet of instant drink mix:

*Pour into your favorite cup
your lover's ashes. Add hot water,
stir until the cup is as warm
as his skin once was against yours.*

Sip slowly, this simple solution.

19. *(Last Light)*

I laid the garlic cloves in a line next to the stove. They kept catching evening light, winking like the one string of X-mas bulbs the man in the next flat keeps over his door. The olive oil heated in the skillet, its smoke hanging a thin blanket on the air. I made piles and piles of bell peppers, onions, potatoes, all of those cloves, before I realized: too much for just one.

He used to hold the fat bulb of garlic in his palm, break off each piece and then peel the skin down to softness. That last time, we ate and ate, drank a decent bottle of Riesling, then lay down together. We let the warmth of the wine course through us like current as he ran a finger over my lips, a tease of the salty garlic scent caught deep in his skin. *I'm still hungry*, I said.

When the sun went down, I let the skillet burn black. I couldn't cook. I ached, insane for the light to come again. When the yellow-white of the garlic cloves blinked off in the dark, I thought I'd peeled them for nothing. I stood at our kitchen window, watching the neighbor's single strand of lights. I put my hand to my face and breathed in, opened my mouth against my palm. It must have looked like I was practicing a kiss, or ready to sob, but I wasn't. I could still taste it all.

20. *(Assumption)*

Today, I painted the kitchen ceiling
orange, a color called *Titian*,
which of course made me think
of his *Assumption of the Virgin*
and the first time we saw it

during our summer in Venice
over the main altar at *i Frari*.
There she was, a revelation:
body ablaze in the orange gown,
bathed in celestial light from behind

and lifted on a pillow of cloud
by the army of cherubic angels
toward God, who called with his look
of stern love for her to join Him.
But below the Virgin—

can you see them, Ross?—the apostles
stood here on Earth reaching up, up, up
as if they could touch her again.
As we humans all—stunned—
tend to do.



James Crews holds an MFA in Poetry Writing from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. His poems have appeared in *Best New Poets 2006*, *Columbia*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Court Green*, *basalt*, and other journals. Last year his manuscript, *Bending the Knot*, won the 2008 Gertrude Press Chapbook Prize. He was the 2009 recipient of the Bernice Slote Award for Emerging Writers from *Prairie Schooner*. He has most recently taught literature and writing at Eastern Oregon University in La Grande, Oregon.

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ISBN: 978-1-934795-09-5