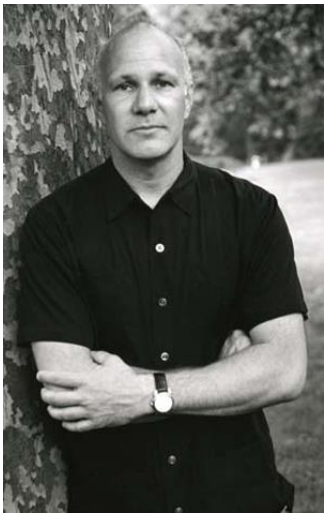
Henri Cole, “Torso” (1993)



Henri Cole, Professor of Literature, Claremont McKenna College (1959-)

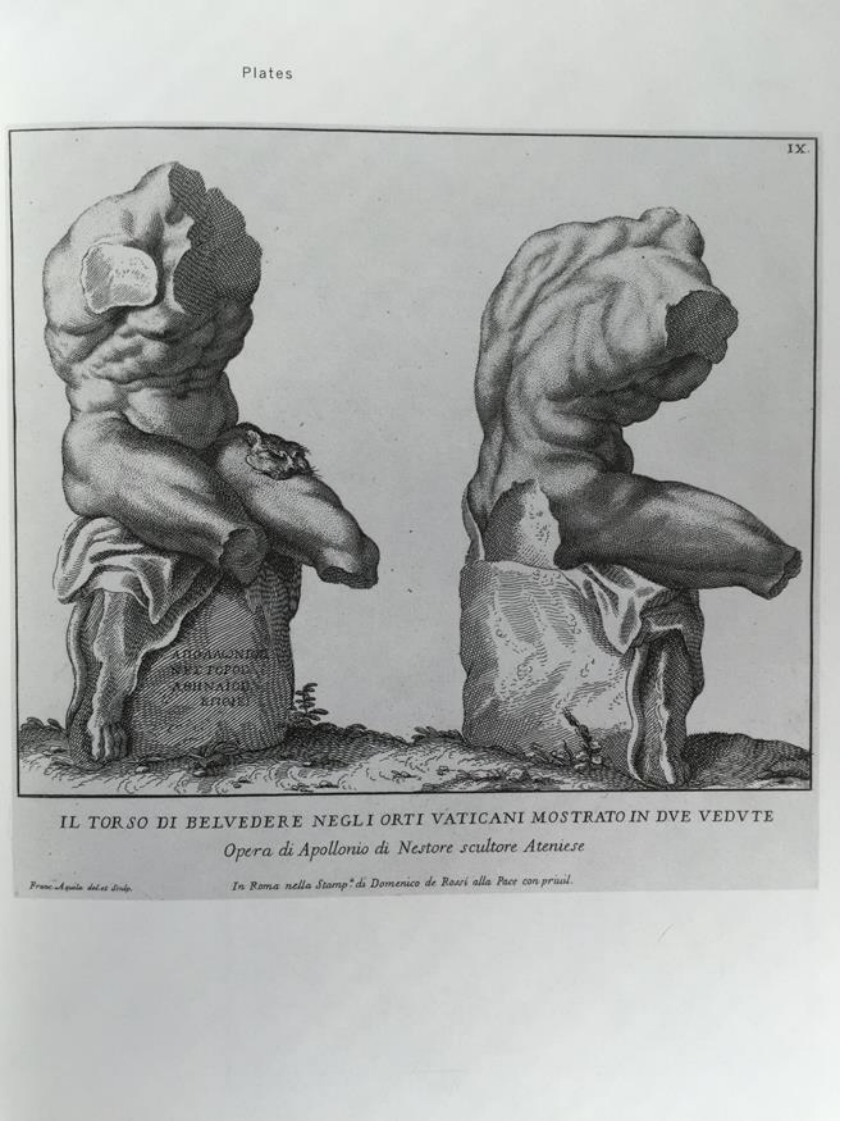
Henri Cole is a multiple award-winning poet and professor of literature who is often characterized as among the most important American writers of his generation.

As I said in class this week, every text has an informing context, indeed, *many* informing contexts. The primary historical context for “Torso” is the AIDS epidemic which swept through North America (and the rest of the world), starting in the 1980s. HIV/AIDS remains an pressing concern both worldwide and in North America. AIDS diagnoses in the U.S. peaked around 1993; two years later, deaths from AIDS related complications would rise to about 50,000 men, women and children per year. So “Torso” is written and published at a deeply sobering moment in this part of world, a moment in which there were no effective drugs to treat persons living with AIDS or who were HIV positive, nothing to slow or stop patients from dying terrible deaths. Living with AIDS in 1993 was terrible enough, but what made things much worse was that persons with AIDS suffered vicious, widespread and irrational discrimination, some of which remains actively in place to this day. Families, employers, landlords, co-workers, as well as federal, state and local officials treated persons with AIDS as pariahs--as dangerous, toxic, monstrous and disposable rather than worthy of love and care. Families found it impossible to tell others that their own loved ones had died of AIDS related complications because the death was felt to be a shameful secret. Even important newspapers like the *New York Times* took to using euphemistic language in its obituaries to describe the cause of death without saying the words outright. Even though it was well-known that HIV was not communicable like TB or the flu (it is transmissible, to be sure, but only under quite specific conditions), persons with AIDS were treated as threatening and untouchable. (The terrible irony is that a person with AIDS is very vulnerable to others; to catch a simple cold can lead to very serious health consequences for a person with AIDS.) Because AIDS surfaced first on the public health radar among gay men in the 1980s it was quickly and erroneously identified as a “gay disease,” even though, worldwide, the huge majority of HIV infections then, as now, arises from heterosexual sex and IV drug use. In North America AIDS continues disproportionately to affect the gay community, as it does IV drug users, prison populations, youth, aboriginal populations, and women. At the height of the

epidemic, prominent American religious and political leaders publically declared that AIDS was a "just" punishment for homosexuality. While tens of thousands of people died of AIDS related complications, then U.S. president Ronald Reagan refused even to say the utter the word in public, thereby legitimating a larger killing silence about the disease. The result was that persons with AIDS, including many gay men, faced a "social death," i.e., there were abandoned by their fellow citizens and by the medical establishment which focused on keeping persons with AIDS segregated from the so-called "general populations" rather than seeking better treatments for those who were desperately ill. –A very dark time in North American, indeed, a *shameful* time that haunts many of us who are old enough to remember it. Gay men responded to this social abandonment by forming health activist organizations (many of which still exist today, including the AIDS Committee of Toronto), organizations who gave the voiceless a voice, who lobbied for better health-care for persons with AIDS, who treated them as deserving a full life, and who worked hard to combat the deeply mistaken and hurtful assumption that HIV/AIDS was a plague visited upon homosexuals for being who they were. Discrimination against HIV positive people and misunderstandings about AIDS remains a significant problem, as those of you in this class who are HIV positive will know better than others. In 1993 these misperceptions were the direct cause of the social death of countless men, women and children in advance of their awful death from AIDS related complications.

Henri Cole adopts the persona (or assumes the "voice") of a person who lives with a mortal illness that can only be AIDS, given the sorrowful moment in history when the poem was written. Cole is letting us overhear the anguished longings and tormented thoughts of a speaker who struggles to express his or her longings *both* for life and for death in a world that has abandoned him or her. The speaker "cannot think who or where I am," yet in the previous verse, the first verse of the poem, in fact, the speaker says he or she is a "narrow waist" that is "propped up in a bed." In other words, to be a mere "narrow waist" "propped up in a bed" means not knowing who you are or where you are. Outside the speaker's hospital room, lover's embrace, and seeing them activates the speaker's memory, recalling him or her to "my former self behind glass." A couple of things to note here: the couple outside who triggers the speaker's memories are reduced to a pair of "pink mouths," a vivid image that substitutes whole persons with *parts* of persons. "Pink mouths" stands metaphorically for the couple the speaker sees: a part of a body, a mouth, stands in place for a whole body. It represents a whole life, a world where lovers love each other and "embrace." But the poem's speaker is cut off from that world and is now treated as untouchable. He or she is reduced to a torso and nothing more. The speaker isn't a part that stands for a whole the way the "pink mouths" stand for full human beings. Instead the speaker is a part that only distantly remembers the whole that he or she once was. (Is the poem an attempt then to make up for that dismemberment? The poem called "Torso," after all, isn't a torso, a fragment of a larger whole. No, the poem is complete, indeed a beautifully crafted sonnet that constantly draws attention to its completeness, every part in its proper place, and much more than the sum of its individual parts. Does the body of the poem take the place of the broken body of the speaker *of* the poem?) The speaker was once a whole body, lived a life brimming with the pleasures and possibilities of the love of others, but now all that is left is only a part, a torso, i.e., the trunk of a body that is missing legs and a head. (A torso is a vivid metaphor for someone who is bereft of the capacity to move ahead or to think ahead. i.e., missing both a head and limbs).

Now, once upon a time, particular torsos of male bodies were considered to be among the most beautiful art objects in the world. I showed you an image of a famous piece of Roman sculpture known as the "Belvedere Torso," a fragment of a sculpture of the Greek demigod, Hercules, that was revered and honoured by artists in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. (See image below.) Artists all over Europe were trained to draw human bodies by practicing drawing images of this ancient and revered relic, a fragment of a long lost sculpture of what was imagined to be a perfect human form--strong, calm and perfectly proportioned. Strange as it may seem to us now, the "Belvedere Torso" represented the height of human beauty and perfection. Precisely because all that survived was a part, artists were tantalized by its magical suggestiveness, by the way in which the marble torso *hinted* at something indescribably lovely to contemplate, the human form in its perfect state. The torso was prized for its capacity to gesture towards that perfected state without actually having to embody it, and thus risking the chance that of becoming a less than perfect statue. The torso gave artists a reason to *imagine* a perfect human form, here, revealingly, presumed to be the form of a *male* body. By comparing himself or herself to a kind of torso, the speaker of Cole's poem remembers the most famous torso in the world but that speaker remembers this torso by way of a complicated contrast. The speaker too was once whole, once loved and was loved. We know this because, after all, that's the place of memory and loss from which this poem of longing is written. But that is all but gone now; all that remains is the image of his or her "former self" captured in a photograph "behind glass" on a bedside table. Like the "Belvedere torso," he or she is the fragmented remains of a former whole; but *unlike* the "Belvedere torso," the speaker-torso is not venerated. Quite the opposite is the case: the speaker is abandoned to a lonely hospital room, so cut off from the world that even the clocks seem oblivious to his or her sufferings.



18th-century engraving of the "Belvedere Torso," a fragment of ancient Roman sculpture that artists prized because it encouraged them to imagine the perfect human form for which it was a tantalizing part.

Seeing the lovers embrace reminds the speaker of "Torso" of his "former self," now frozen in time in a photograph on "the night table." That photograph is "behind glass," a metaphor for the way in which that earlier life is protected from mortal illness but also held away from the speaker. He or she can see that "former life" but only through the barrier of the glass. "Behind glass" also means something else. It suggests that the speaker is a kind of specimen; he or she can see himself for what he or she once was, but only from a certain distance, as if the speaker were observing a creature in a laboratory. "Behind glass" becomes a metaphor for the gulf that now separates the speaker from his or her earlier self, reminding us of yet one more way in which the speaker has been dismembered.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the period in time in which "Torso" was written and published, some American photographers and film-makers were taking photographs of gay men living with AIDS that had a significant impact on how AIDS was perceived and understood. I've reproduced some of those images

below. Photographers would, in subsequent years, start to take very different kinds of photographs, pictures of persons living with AIDS that showed them going about their daily lives rather than as wasted bodies on their death-beds. Those photographs became much more possible with the advent of an entirely new class of drugs that came on line in the late 1990s that significantly improved the health of those who had access to the drugs and who could afford them (still a big problem globally). But around 1993, it came as a shocking revelation to many that persons with AIDS possessed an intrinsic dignity, just like people without AIDS, and that they deserved not to be viewed as diseased pariahs but were instead each individuals with their unique hopes and histories. (Think how appalling it is that individuals who were so ill had to find ways to persuade others that they were human!) Persons with AIDS are not their illness—no one is their illness--and the photographs helped viewers see *both* the severity of the illness whose symptoms were often not widely known *and* the fact that those living with AIDS had faces unlike any other face. The photographs helped in some small but important way to remind everyone who looked at them carefully that "persons with AIDS" is not an anonymous group of people but quite to the contrary, made up of individuals , each one of which having a unique story worth telling, a singular life worth helping. "Torso" is the poetic equivalent of those photographs. How so?

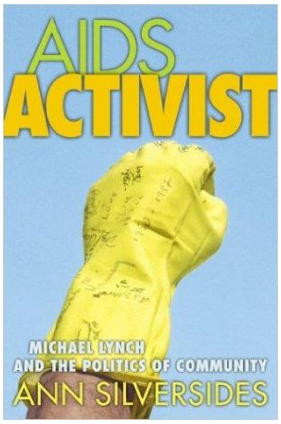
Nicholas Nixon, *Tom Moran, Boston, Mass., 1988*

A still of Tom Joslin from Tom Joslin's documentary, *Silverlake Life: The View From Here* (1993). The photograph ("my former self behind glass") shows Joslin and Mark Massi, his partner.

Therese Frare, *David Kirby on his deathbed, Ohio, 1990*.

One of the most challenging metaphors in the poem is the one unfurled at exact midpoint in the poem. By putting it there, Cole suggests that the heart or core of his poem's worries lies here. "I am the white

embroidered glove longing to be / tugged upon a cadet's hand." The difficulty of his metaphor is Cole's way of inviting you to slow down and to tarry with what he is doing at this point in the poem. In the previous verse, the speaker has told us those "those who visit seldom touch me." Touching and not being touched is in the air at this point in the poem, as it were, so it is interesting that the very next verse evokes gloves and hands, also associated with touching and being touched and of being in intimate contact with an other even if through an intervening medium. The speaker is treated as untouchable; but the speaker sees himself or herself as anything but, indeed, the metaphor of the lovely glove is the language Cole uses to express a longing for intimacy and to be *worthy* of intimacy, a longing to be as close to another as a glove is to a hand. I say "intimacy," because this glove fits tightly and closely, hence the need to be "tugged" on. But a glove is not a hand; there is also a space of separation between the glove and the hand, as wonderfully close together as they are, the glove closely following the exact contours of the other's hand, the hand filling in all the spaces of the glove. Hovering in the background is something else; given that the main informing context of the poem is the AIDS epidemic, the glove on the hand cannot help but recall the importance of interrupting the transmission of HIV through the use of condoms. Long before "safe sex" became a central part of public AIDS education, various communities (gay men and sex workers, to name but two) in the U.S. and Canada encouraged individuals *not* to abstain from sex but to stop having unprotected sex. In the 1980s and 1990s, as today, these communities resisted the general panic about sex that had swept through North America in the wake of the AIDS epidemic, a panic that declared, yet again, that men having sex with men was deviant and unhealthy. These communities were instead "sex positive," i.e., they did not demonize sexual practices between men as immoral or perverse. Instead they affirmed a wide range of sexual pleasures an important part of splendid diversity of human thriving. But they counselled the use of condoms. The image of the glove on a hand recalls that good advice, the coupling of pleasure and healthfulness. Yet another kind of glove also haunts the poem at this point. During the height of the epidemic in North America, AIDS activists faced police wearing yellow rubber gloves. The police did not need those gloves, but they wore them nevertheless, having succumbed to the hysteria and irrational fears about HIV and AIDS. AIDS activists took those yellow gloves and made them into a symbol of resistance, turning the gloves against those who used them. Gloves are caught up in the epidemic in complex ways and Cole's poem taps into those complexities, drawing sustenance from them so that the poem thrums with possible meanings.



The speaker compares himself metaphorically to a “white embroidered glove.” “His” glove is beautiful and cherished *not* something that represents shaming exclusion and fear of contamination. To be a white glove is to be treated “with white gloves,” as the old saying goes, i.e., to be treated respectfully, carefully, and as something precious, singular and worthy . . . rather than as a merely disposable body, a body that does not matter. Why does the speaker of “Torso” imagine himself to be a “white embroidered glove” on a “cadet’s hand”?

The speaker describes himself using this richly contextualized language. It is a kind of cry from the heart, the insistence, against all odds, that the speaker is something much more than a dismembered body. And yet the speaker hardly has those words out before another impulse overtakes him or her. Cole won’t let the verse run out its course before that impulse makes itself heard in the speaker’s exclamation, “Let me die!.” Suddenly the description of the speaker as a “white embroidered glove” seems dreamily improbable when it is sharply and suddenly contrasted in the same verse with the simple and unadorned pleading for his or her own death. As long as the speaker is alive, he or she is still a creature of longing and love, a creature still in possession of imagination and thus in a position to picture himself or herself as something beautiful and as belonging to the world and in the company of others. But the poem puts to us that the speaker is also someone who longs too for death and for his or her lonely suffering to come to an end. The speaker is *both* of those things and it is the complex and unfurling tension between them that is the source of the poem’s energies and tensions. The speaker is not one thing. How does the poem capture that restlessness and indecision?

That dynamic tension characterizes the voice of the poem until its last sentence, which begins towards the end of the third to last verse and runs to the last and fourteen verse. The speaker says that now it is “as if” he or she were “a marauding heart.” The “heart” is a metaphor, familiar to all of you, I’m sure, for a person’s longings, desires and loves: that’s why Valentine’s Day cards, cakes and candies are plastered with images of red hearts. But a “marauding heart” is something else again. A marauder is a bandit, a plundering rogue and a selfish raider of an other’s treasures, a trespasser and thief with criminal intents. That is what the speaker’s life has been reduced to, as if his or her desires, longings and loves were somehow illegal or illicit, in violation of some law. Or so it seems. For the introduction of that little phrase, “*as if*,” does a lot of work here; the speaker is *not* saying *I am a marauding heart* in the way in which, only a few verses earlier, he or she says that *I am an embroidered glove*. No, at this point the speaker says that my heart feels *like* it is a marauder, which is not quite the same thing as saying that *it <u>is</u> a marauder*. The speaker all but internalizes that sense of himself or herself as a kind of criminal…*all but*. *As if* is the speaker’s quite way of saying that *I may feel like a maurading heart* but *I am not only that heart, that my heart is more than what I have been made to feel it is*. But the situation is still dire because so impoverished. The one he or she “sought,” the longing for the other and the fundamentally important need to be with others, is now collapsed into something very small. The only trace of his or her “heart” now is the “pink dot” on the screen of the “monitor.” That “pink dot” contrasts with the “pink mouths” of the couples the speaker had seen earlier in the poem, those whose heart’s desires were visible for everyone to see and to affirm. Is this all that now remains of the speaker’s heart, a fading dot on the screen of a monitor? Only a moment before the “heart” was a metaphor for a loving and desiring life. Now it threatens to become a mere pumping organ whose rhythms are traced on the

screen of the monitor. How to imagine this enormous reduction of life from a whole body to a torso? It would be like giving someone not a heart-shaped box of chocolates for Valentine's Day card but instead a box containing an actual heart. That's what the speaker says he or she has left in the world.

The poem ends with the last two verses rhyming ("dot" and "sought"). That gesture is called a *rhyming couplet*, and the repetition of the sound signals that the poem has brought itself to an end, snapping itself shut. But that does not mean that the poem has resolved its complexities. Far from it. An important part of reading the assigned literature in this course is sensitizing yourself to the deeply ambiguous ways in which so many of the texts conclude. Good poems both bring themselves to an end, i.e., prepare for their own endings, *and* open outwards, raising many more questions than they answer. How is that the case here? The speaker of "Torso" is shaken by his or her isolation as a dismembered untouchable whose "heart," whose longings, have dwindled to almost nothing. Even time appears to have turned its back on the speaker, unfurling in ways that feel cruelly indifferent to the speaker's suffering. *But it is important to remember that for all of the speaker's torment, one thing remains, and that is the poem itself, a poem that is exquisitely crafted, brimming with vivid and complex metaphors and paced by a carefully regulated rhyme scheme.* The poem called "Torso" is not a torso. Return to the poem and track the repetitions of the sounds of the rhymes to remind yourself of how they work. Read the poem aloud to your friends, in particular savouring those rhymes as you say them. Read the rhyming sounds of the last two lines with real purpose, letting them do the work of clicking the door shut on the end of the poem. The poem is a sonnet, like Donald Justice's "The Wall," and sonnets are characterized by an unusually high degree of internal organization: they are like a Swiss watch, i.e., lots of energy and motion coiled up in a precision-crafted instrument. The poem is like that "white embroidered glove," i.e., beautifully crafted, shaped by organizing principles that you can identify if you spend some time with its various moving parts. The speaker tells us that he or she is in a condition of extraordinary duress and, given the circumstances, we have no reason to doubt that claim. The speaker would rather die than go on. Or at least a part of that speaker. (We will see an analogous form of ambivalence or mixed feeling in John Keat's "Ode to a Nightingale." And yet the speaker *does* go on and, moreover, he or she is so much more than a mere "marauding heart." The reason that we know that is that we have the poem that we have before us. The speaker tells us that he or she is a dishevelled and dismembered body that doesn't matter and that has been made to feel not to matter. But the poem itself tells a very different story. *The poem is the "white embroidered glove" and "cadet's hand" is the poet who wears it, a beautiful sonnet mated closely to the longings and losses of a flesh and blood life.*

"Torso" (1993)

	Rhyme Scheme	
Propped up in bed, my narrow waist a pedestal,	a	[pedestal = metaphor]
I cannot think who or where I am, until	a	
a couple, pausing in the corridor, embrace,	b	
their pink mouths calling to mind the face	b	
on the night table of my former self behind glass.	c	
My temperatures chart a perilous graph,	d	
alas, those who visit seldom touch me.	e	
I am the white embroidered glove longing to be	e	[glove = metaphor]
tugged upon a cadet's hand. "Let me die!"	f	
I implore, but each night the village clocks, dry-eyed,	g	
force me to live another day. Like gods,	h	
they are jealous of one another. As if a marauding	I	[*As if* intro's 2 similes]
heart is all I am, or was, and the pink dot	j	
on the monitor a marker for the one I sought.	j	[rhyming couplet]