

***Mother, Memory, Monotony***

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington  
2017

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:  
School of Interdisciplinary Arts & Sciences

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**Abstract**

***Mother, Memory, Monotony***

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***Joshua Caleb Osborn*** is a second year Master's student in Creative Writing and Poetics at the University of Washington Bothell. His work hybridizes genre through sound and affect, attempting to produce a more poetic prose, or more prosaic poetry, particularly in performative and vocal environments. His thesis continuously wanders around a central premise: the immanence of his mother's death. Caught between reality, dream, and memory the speaker seeks to preserve or repossess the identity of a mother who is no longer capable of preserving or possessing her own. The speaker's relentless attempts to locate or define her fall desperately short, and it's those very failures that inhabit the page as a consequence.

His writing process is self-described as 'apocalyptic' in the Greek sense of the word, literally meaning 'an uncovering,' or revelation of knowledge. "Revelation is gradual and unending: it calls attention to the processes by which the truth it speaks of is revealed." He's interested in the capacities of language as a truth-bearing faculty, in the powers of belief and reason, and the frictions that warp secular and religious institutions. How is it—there are so many ways of telling the truth?

***Mother, Memory, Monotony***

“I remember when I touched my sleeping mother’s hair, it sparked in my hands, and I thought she was inhuman, but I was young, and only years later would I understand she was under the spell of an erotic dream.” — Thomas Heisse

I was thinking of my mother, of her wild hair, the hours she spent in the vanity “teasing” it. Her hair of attic and old coat comes to me on a breeze of memory beating its wings, as a moth veers toward a warmth of lenient fire built around the campsites in my shrunken head, where my mother has been known to wander like a toothy gypsy uncontrollably gathering bundles of twigs to stack near the fire to burn when the light grows gentle, as voices of stories of the witchy woman told in gaseous tongues change the states of solid objects to intangible beliefs, like loud epiphanies scrawled over chalkboards, and the chalk granules under the fingernails taste like powdered genius, until the equation erodes everything we thought we knew about ourselves and the bipedal apes, in which grind the bones into dust swept under the couches of our lungs, so we’re told to keep breathing by the first responders, don’t stop breathing in the dust, which beats our clocks against a linear model of love that melts into money and the day ends with a comma .

My mother is held together by summer rental memories of three small children swimming out their baptisms in the green water where it’s shallow enough to stand but no one’s standing, no one has the ability to stand without deliverance from the miry clay. Our childhood heads are like locked diaries under the water pinching our noses, our faces approaching the surface, developing like a Polaroid. But they will not emerge. Our faces

clank against the undersided lake of glass, where our heads utter like lambs as the bubbles bullet from our mouths, and our mother, skipping her stones, does not see her children pounding our palms against the underside of memory embedded like an iceberg. Or is it us, her trio of cherry children, who stand above the frozen lake ripening out of season with our impeccable hands raised in the air, as if to ask a question of every heaven, where has our mother gone? and in an unrelated instance we feel the fractal bolts of frozen water cracking its knuckles or breaking its bones, under which my mother has been stationed like the siren who signs her name in echoes that lose their gusto with each verberation until the breath can no longer hold, the sound can no longer bounce, and the ears with which to receive her shed their infant skins. But once the words are given they cannot be taken back, and she knows this, so she spends half her moons roaming the floor of a spouting fountain peeling up double-sided wishes the weight of coins and shucking the faces of dead presidents discarding the skins like the peels of an orange. The other half she spends pressing her forefingers to her temples in an attempt to channel her consciousness into our own, and while asleep I'll feel her meditations sweep up my body like an astral projection and my brothers appear in polyphony peaking through the slits in their eyelids, and in hybrid sighs of exhaustion or annoyance tell me to give it up, that they are tired of floating in endless rotation around the delusion of mothers who are not ours, and who only dream us here in temptation, like the sirens of old with teeth like piano keys and the moon colored skin that keeps me cold enough to long for consummation, and yet I ask, who does not want to feel pursued, to be laid claim to, to know that one's existence is a matter of dire consequence for another?

Four versions of my mother came to me through a window. As I recall, only her heads had appeared. Her body wasn't entirely gone but it was absent in a way that things go missing, perhaps lost, until found again— but its absence still quietly emanates. As if the act of finding it did more harm than letting it slip gradually away, letting it slide and stretch like a slinky until it decides to come back and jump over itself like a hero. And it wasn't clear if she was the one who had lost her body, or if she was even looking for it. She just seemed to stare. Not at me, but slightly off, as if something were happening behind me, and she was taken in.

If she had her hands, her hands would be folded over each other, as if posed for a portrait or patient, for a diagnosis. Behind me she sees a man in a white coat with a stethoscope draped over his neck like a pair of deflated horns. He's pointing to some glowing charts and flipping through his legal pad of notes, flipping as far back as the first time she visited and left with a heart disease.

Her face was like a map I'd only seen once before it rolled up like a scroll in my hands. I lightly labeled the scroll in pencil 'FACE' and placed it with the others in the attic of my childhood home. The attic is lit by a single bulb with a string of beads that might as well be pearls in the appointed light. The scrolls soak up the light like rising loaves of bread spangled with salt. The attic was not a part of the original home, but was later created to store things of sentimental use, a box of disposable cameras, un-rewound VHS tapes, and

terribly fashioned—though strangely trendy childhood clothes, all those things that seem to keep us as much as we keep them.

The attic was not intended to store my mother. But, I keep her there because the attic is the only place she can be seen. I have tried carrying her scrolls with me out of the house wrapped around my waist and they continue to unravel across the asphalted boulevards, cul-de-sacs, and city centers much like a piece of toilet paper sticks under one's shoe and flaps between strides, although this particular piece of paper continues to unravel out of itself over the parks and galleries, over the driveways and dusty roads to nowhere over my own body like a mummy wrapping or cocoon I have yet to evolve through and suddenly the darkness makes sense in this webbed casing of memory. I have been in this attic with my mother ever since I was born.

Maybe it wasn't my mother anymore, maybe I'm recalling a look-alike, a copy. Regardless, I've followed the maps thus far, intentionally or not. I think I've always seen them in the corner of my eye, and sometimes the glare of the sun confirms this. Her face, an outstanding light, the same light wherever I go and no matter how fast I move.

The map of my mother's face isn't traditional in the sense that it represents a reality to scale. The map has the exact dimensions of my mother's head. And it continues to age. The ink in her eyes has faded, and so much dust. I used to think the lines on her face were

leading me somewhere, and I followed them. I knew them as one knows his own vices, and is privy to their secret delights. Now her lines are words I can't pronounce, and not because I won't pronounce them.

I've shouted a box of words at my mother, but never her words. The type of box that gathers voodoo thoughts and whittles sacrificial language dolls from bars of soap that instead of bubble, layer over the skin like a salve of aloe scented ointment the wearer can no longer smell but which seizes the air of the people around, now staring at you like a rumor. The box sits in the center of a dilapidated room with a ring of approximately twenty folded foldout chairs lying on the floor. No one seems to enter the room anymore and we refuse to show our guests out of sheer embarrassment. Now and again I re-enter to stand amongst the scuffed floors, my feet encased in enormous heavy boots. I shuffle around on bent knees with small, even steps along a straight monotonous line, disregarding the winding and torturous points of the chairs that pass me by. I take one up in my hands and fold it out near the box to sit and sift through its contents. The little dolls are stripped bare exposing their mannequin bodies devoid of sex organs and muscle, and I'm overcome with a blinding pressure in my head. The sound of shattering ceramic pulls me back to vision and there's a cut in my hand dripping small blips of blood. I'm no longer holding the doll. The wall in front of me is impressed with a single viscus of tissue that beats as a heart and glows as one too. I must have thrown the doll, but did I? The beating of the heart matches my footsteps as I walk over and see that what hangs suspended on the wall is not a heart, nor any part of the anatomical body that can be identified. What's plastered there in the

middle of the wall can only be described as a stone beating with life. Surrounding the stone are little tendrils like veins from the stroke of a brush that rib through the wall and pulse. The stone is etched with strange characters that look more like drawings of constellations spiraling toward a central core, and in that core a blinking azure blue like that of a clear unclouded sky. I look down at the floor and I'm falling. The chairs floating in the air around me spinning as tops. I grab the legs of one, wrestle it to its seated shape and plant myself in it, closing my eyes and scrunching my face like a sponge. My eyes open and the sky is still, I have leveled off my descent. The wind peels against my skin but I am no longer afraid. What will happen will happen, and I am no different.

I read my mother's face and immediately knew I would never know myself. I would trace my finger over her lines to touch what she meant by living. I'm not convinced she was trying to tell me something. Maybe she decided that some things are best not to articulate, then became this map in defiance.

What makes a map a good map, or at least a useful map, is its accuracy. Satellites have captured the world with empirical precision; those maps cannot be disputed. My mother's face was the least accurate map. In no way did her features correlate to things you would expect to find when using them as a reference. The wine-dark ink of her lips did not lead me to a cold, sloshing mother-of-three drinking her ship through a bottle. And yet her teased, marquee hair did not lead me to a young, vivacious woman burning the wick at both ends to support a growing number of bones.

I talk about my mother as if she were always the same mother. This is not the case. I am not worried I won't recognize my mother, I am worried she won't recognize herself. That one day a mirror will deceive her; that she might hold it and say, "none of this is mine," and decide to leave without moving a muscle.

I fear meeting a woman who claims she is not my mother.

My mother is at the point where she wants to spend much of her life asleep. She comes through the door and drops her bags. I don't hear her. Just the bags hitting the floor. She has become so eerily quiet, if but for the things she carries. This is the importance of her bad posture. Labor, fatigue—all for silence. She shies away to her bed, slips out of her shoes. Her body unspools and leaves a residue like water down a drain.

Her bags are neatly placed at the top of the stairs. She has asked me to take them down to the car. The bags are full. Their weight inconsequential. They have handles for carrying, and a shoulder strap. Bags are a kind of confession, after all. I trudge them down the stairs, and out to the car. All her indulgences have gathered and hung on my limbs.

Even now if you were to ask, I would suggest that I have never lost my mother. I would talk of her as if she were ever occurring. There will be an unabridged period where I will continue to refer to her in the present tense, and refuse to correct myself. What are the

odds of a single person to never go missing? To never die?

My mother created ways for us to identify her in a crowd of people. Whenever she took us to a busy part of the city, she would walk with one arm raised as if she were signaling to someone far ahead, and we fought for her other hand. Vacant cabs would pull up and honk their horns, then bolt off in a tizzy. We would walk down a city street, and she might disappear with all the other bodies and faces moving in every direction. The claustrophobic noise of a city street would short-circuit our tiny heads. But, we felt that everywhere we looked we would find that hand in the air—even if we did not want to find it. And then we would notice the palm of a hand headed directly for us.

What does it mean to be missed? To notice. To fail to notice.

Once inside she would turn her back on the rest of the house. She would pivot away with her coat in her hands to shield her worn expressions, her sighs, her postures that might have otherwise had us worried about her health, about her ability to continue working at the elementary school where ninety percent of the children were combating some type of learning disorder caused by household trauma. Each day she spent several hours meeting with children who were confused about who they could trust, and the days she earned a little favor with those children were good days, until three o'clock when the buses came and they lined their drooping heads along the crackled sidewalk, each one shuddering at the same shade of dangerous yellow and rust, and while some would break rank and run at

separate speeds toward the school, the remaining children converged to fill the empty spaces in line. The bus doors open, the sound of hydraulics like a shortness of breath. And before the first child takes that oversized step onto the bus which she knows will only inflame her misery as has been proven time and time again when dropped off and left alone in a grungy apartment so cold and so hungry she has ceased to call it hunger, and adjusts her body to malnourishment. Penelope takes her space on the couch, hugs her knees to her chest and focuses on the door, terrified of what face might come through, of what face always comes through it—but before she takes that excessively large, cartoonish step she turns to my mother and asks, “can I go home with you, Mrs. ---?”

It couldn't be said she saw us sitting on the top stair pretending we were falling, and as we pretended to fall we imagined her sweeping us up in her arms and scrubbing her face on our bare stomachs. I had never laughed so hard in my head. We chose not to fall when her back was turned, or else we might get the spoon. The thought filled our stomachs with ice water.

'The spoon' was a tool my mother used to punish our bad behavior. She kept two wooden-handled spoons in plain view on the counter in the kitchen as a cautionary totem of how close we are at all times of the day to being whopped on the backside. The spoons were of different sizes; one was long and slender with a larger head, and the other short but dense like a small, flattened mallet. When we were in trouble, we had to choose a spoon. We would stomp our feet on our way to the kitchen, mad at ourselves for being

loose enough to get caught, and terrified to make the choice. More often the choice would sting more deeply than the actual strikes, and if we didn't choose, she would, which was even more despicable. We would resist as long as we could, until my mother picked a spoon, after which we would desperately beg for the other, as if her pick would have hurt just that little bit more. The way back to her bedroom was damning and heavy like the Bridge of Sighs crossing our hearts and hoping to disappear before the gallows string us too close together so our swaying forsaken bodies knock into each other as we claw at the ropes of our necks. I remember witnessing my brothers go first. The spoon wielded by my mother in her strong arm, could it be the same arm that tucked me into touch my chin so slightly I may sleep. The arm that held the picture stories, the arm of lilac and fresh linen that mopped our foreheads and parted the hair from our averted faces. Yes this was the arm that had provided nearly all our comforts, and yet posed to deliver a sharp smite of pain as a cobra or rattle-snake, and oh did the spoon rattle a whoosh through the air like a hot maraca, my brother bent over her knee coming undone like a zipper. In moments like those my mother was inaccessible. She had metamorphosed into an authority beyond our jurisdiction and we were left clinching and rubbing our hinds wishing the sting would shrink.

There had been a spot on her back meant for touching. The spot would never move and when touched would make her purr as a feral cat approaching the cove of its litter. When there were no conversations to touch it, she opened a door. She did not go through. Instead, she leaned her back into the crease of the door. And scratched. The moment passed like

solace, and then the sound of that solace.

Her body afforded her pleasures like doors; doors that remained open for twenty or more years. Then one day, shut. The sound of bolting and double bolting from the other side. She had become so casual with the arrangement of rooms that the doors went disregarded.

There was a time when she ran on her toes and could trace all along the walls of a room in a number of strides. I have forgotten the number. Now, my mother will not move. Someone move her.

Maybe she hasn't lost her body, she's lost the use of it. Which might mean, she's alive.

My mother's death has not occurred. I'll never believe this if I don't say it. I may get a call from her at any moment. She will say, "hey, bug. How are **you**?" I will lie. I never know how I am. How is anyone to know with certainty what constitutes their being? How is anyone to give an explanation that our bodies are constantly making decisions without our approval?

If I let this memory end I'm not sure I could make my way back to it. The original story feels far off on the horizon. Perhaps this is the journey back. The map was only available to me once when I closed my eyes. When I opened them it lingered there, blurry, like the dark-green spot of a sun when you've been caught staring at it for too long.

I've opened my eyes and seem to be set down alone in the middle of a field. If I were certain

of one thing it would be the map of my mother. My mother does not speak on behalf of the map because she is unaware. She is unaware she is a map. I pull her out of my backpack, a scroll of rolled up parchment I begin unrolling. The parchment curls underneath and into itself, rolling back up again from the other side like a mobius strip. The markings on the map are fluid, dendritic like the topographies of a meandering river that washes in lines from left to right, it pools up in banks and gushes as a geyser the fine black ink streamed in the air, or is it oil to fund my mother's gypsy wanderings, or dark mineral water enchanted with the ash of drowsy stories, and the wells in the map are other dimensional in a way that dreams exist without our conscious acknowledgment, staring at these wells of black circles slicing themselves from the sphere, creating pointilism portraits of missing peoples, my mother is second from the right in the upper row wearing a crown of black dots like a collage of ladybug wings and my eyes still involuntarily blink at that ludicrous hue of soft red like light through a taut shade. Incredibly, I can no longer recognize the portraits that are not my mother. Little gray old men and women whose indistinct faces, corroded by life, seemed covered by cobwebs—faces with watery, immobile eyes slowly leaking away, emaciated faces as discolored and innocent as the cracked and weathered bark of trees, and now like bark smelling only of rain and sky.

The fallow field is some odd acres and filled with clusters of reddish soil that look as if something used to be planted there, wheat or corn perhaps, but the crop has either died out, or is waiting to grow again. Their dormancy makes me tired, so I lie on the loamy clay, make my hands into a wedge to rest on, and let the soil receive me. It seems to me, lying in

the dirt that my mother is nearby tending to the fallen fences.

I have been in an infinite amount of ways to remember my mother. She has become so accessible, I have begun to wonder if I am her. If I have taken her place. If I have thought my way into her body and that would explain the darkness. That would explain the hole in my map.

I'm staring at my mother's mouth, at the back of the map of the mouth. Here I've found the hole, which isn't empty, but so full of nothing that nothing spills. Nothing leaks, and nothing is wet. It is true that her mouth moves ceaselessly. I am miming her speech, "I am gone." I left a while ago." I have become the departed.

There seems to be something for me here. So, I've come back. You might ask where I have gone. You might ask for how long. I will fail to describe it to you.

"Sunday I took a little rest on a bench in the cemetery. My faith passed away once more in the shade there. No one heard my prayers, and I felt as if I were fishing with a line in that garden of stones."

"[It was] one gray day, and shadowless, I went off in search of a friend—another self, one who knew, as did I, that pain casts you down with your last belongings—necessity, body and prayer. I wanted the [O]ne who comes when you need it, and only when you've given

up.”

“I might have stood on a chess board, waiting for some hand to raise me.”

While reading, I'll often reach the bottom of a page and fail to recall what was read. I will have days like this. An entire day passes and I'll lay in bed, staring at but never quite reaching the ceiling, where I will encounter a blank space, a piece omitted. I will not remember how I started, so I'll lose myself in their beginnings over and over and over. Somedays I'll only begin.

In two weeks I find out I have the rest of my life to live. That gives me two weeks to study the map of my mother. Any longer than that, I would keep putting it off. I would insist there is plenty of time, until there are less than two weeks to live.

I've begun today how I begin every day, attempting to reproduce the map of my mother.

The map of my mother is incomplete. I'm uncertain if this is because the map remains to be finished, or if my mother was never a complete person. It's tough to imagine her all put together at once. I can only separate her into pieces. Her face is the piece that constitutes the map, and within her face are holes the size of fingertips. I put my fingers to the holes. Her right cheek has been touched bare, and the empty space is large enough to see through. Through her cheek I see my hand behind her head turn to bones like an x-ray. Their white

calcium length surprises me. I've never seen the parts of my body without skin, but this is not what surprises me. I'm surprised it has taken this long. Her cheek has become the lens in which to see things from underneath, as if everything had been a disguise, and I cried, not wanting to be a floating mask.

I touched my hand to her face until there was nothing but her lips. They were slightly parted and quivering like a fish. Words were tucked between them, though I couldn't understand what she meant without the rest of her face. So much context had been stored in her flame-green eyes that burned straight through our vault of childish secrets, the crooks in her ears that indexed our midnight escapes, the subtle dents of her dimples signing the letters of our names. True meanings of language are only revealed in flesh.

Today I tried drawing the map of my mother on paper. I began in the center of the page, perhaps where her nose would be. Where might have God begun her sketches? I drew one part of her face at a time, each one flat and misshapen like an amateur portraiture but I continued drawing until I was no longer creating my mother, but only my memory of her, which was isolated and fraudulent. Something was happening to the markings on the page, they began drawing themselves. Perhaps it was artistic license that turned my mother into an impostor, and still there's that constant quality within her that remains untranslatable, and which serves to conjure her with some consistency. These acts of remembering, these attempts to represent her in another form have defiled the original. Each recollection brings forth a piece of her more hollow than the last. I will try again tomorrow.

It could be I am not remembering my mother anymore, that I'm remembering any mother. She has become a general entity. It could be I'm working my way to her, as the map would suggest. It could be I am remembering a map of a city that is not my mother, but they share similar wavelengths. The city is designed in spirals that at one angle look as though they were intended to flow from the center to the outside, moving around in a circle progressively outward, while at another angle the flow of the spirals carry inward and end in the center of the city where my mother would stand on an 'x' and say, 'here, this is where I will meet you.'

Being the youngest sibling, I was the last to get to know her. Much of what I learned about her came to me second-hand from others. She was this, she was that. You'd think that, being her son, I would be qualified to talk of her. Not only am I unqualified because of how little I knew her of my own account, I am at the same time relieved I wasn't close enough to feel the debilitating loss those who were close to her feel. "Nature confesses that she has given to the human race the tenderest hearts, by giving us the power to weep. This is the best part of us." Though this relief is on the surface, and only shows itself in social circles, whenever I am asked about her I am able to brush it off entirely and suggest I never knew her well enough to talk of her at length, or with any confidence.

There must be something I'm not saying about my mother, or don't want to say. It's rather

simple to write around her, which is to write about her.

My mother has gone through the process of losing her own mother. I use the word process because losing someone is gradual, even if one's death is instantaneous there remain traces of one's life that decorate the cracks of the living. What of their possessions? I long for a world where the death of a person means the death of the things they owned, that in the space of time it took to siphon their spirit, similarly their belongings would dematerialize and fizzle away with them, and not as a way for the living to cheaply forget their life, but so the departed might select from an armory of sentimentals a piece to equip as they continue to travel through. Tragically, this is not how possession works. Instead of serving the departed, it ceases to serve anyone. What's left behind tends to sit on the tongue and burn, like too much pepper. I've found the more my mother is not around, the more I notice her vacant garments. They've taken a place in the attic where we used to store seasonal decor. We have since donated the decor for now there is only one season. But the garments are unbelievably gorgeous. They've collected a lifetime of ballrooms and chandeliered corridors that impart small slices of light like the heels of stars that have accumulated into a reservoir of remarkable suns. I sit and dwell on their radiance for a forgotten amount of time, until I can no longer bear the exposure. And each time I close the door to the attic I feel as if I am putting to sleep the dawn that emits a self-igniting purple flame.

If I don't have the map on hand I just enter the territory.

There was a point when her lines were straight and defined. They gave a certain punctuality to her facial expressions when she laughed or wept, it's how we told her apart from her sister and the other women in our lives. When we were young we were visited and cared for by so many of her friends we weren't wrong to think we had multiple mothers. There are those of us who are raised by a determined number of mothers. No number can be said to be better than the other. It's commonly believed that one mother is the proper number, but this is a false belief. Ladies that looked like my mother were gathered together in front of a cafe, where tables had already been put on the pavement. The ladies were sitting at them in brightly colored dresses and swallowing the breeze in small gulps as if it were ice cream. Their skirts rustled, the wind worried them from below like a small angry dog. Their faces loomed large and washed over me making babyish noises and talking, as if through a balloon, in obsessive high-pitched squeaks. The ladies became flushed, their faces burned from the dry wind or envy or both, and they continued to pass me around like the child they'd never had.

I've been forced from remembering my mother full time to part time. I can no longer afford to be with her for more than a couple of hours, a couple of days a week. She has become an economic infringement and a health hazard. In fact I have had to replace remembering my mother with a part time job, so now I'm paid every two weeks to not remember her.

At one point in their relationship, perhaps after a conversation turned argument over tin foil dinners in their basement apartment sitting on their flower-patterned sofa with their

flower patterned napkins stuffed in their collars and their legs as balance scales leveled their plates of leftover food in their laps aggressively warm from reheating and overheating, my mother threatened to leave my father. That night, she had planned on saying it, but her mouth was full of salivated food and my father was engaged in his own rate of chewing. She kept the threat tucked just above the teeth behind her upper lip and some nights at dinner the edges would catch on a spaghetti noodle fondling out of her mouth or bite from a dollop of smashed potato with a little depression in the middle for gravy, mixing with the bolus of food in her mouth as she chewed and piece by piece chipped away the fragments of her leaving, until she could finally taste again without the hard pucker of her cheeks, without adding pepper to every dish, after every bite, a couple of shakes of pepper. That night, I was conceived amidst the sloshing of full stomachs and the deteriorated threat that died with a single orgasm, and to this day I wake with a taste in my mouth like pepper.

Before I was born she wrote me a note. She began, "Dear Dear." I go back and forth on how to read this. Whether she was referring to me as 'dear' in which I receive a sense of comfort to know that, while I may never get to know her, she may have known me, or whether she was able to begin the note at all, that the second 'Dear' is simply a repetition of the first in an infinite skip of the record. Perhaps a third possibility presents itself carrying a tone of conciliation, an apology or regret such as, "oh dear" or "poor dear."

My father completed three quarters of coursework in seminary school before deciding that God was never something to be completed, but rather something to be chased after, like a finer version of yourself sipping port from a recycled chalice of stained glass glowing with light from within, sitting and standing and climbing through Borges' Library of Babel perusing the ornate shelves for the french translation of the english of the greek from latin translations of the listless editions of the Gospel of John. The finer version of you speaks French and smokes flavored tobacco from a vaporizer pen. The finer version stokes a fire with a Roget's thesaurus and selects pages to twist in bowties before placing a large log over the flame and nestling in the upholstered chair that rests upon a loose heap of opened and discarded books. It is assumed the books have been read, which is to say, the books have been used and can no longer contain what they once stored. You pick up the next book in the queue and to your puzzled surprise find that you are the one who has written it. You have written of your mother, of her wild hair. And if this is not God, this is what a god might be like, holding our own creations in a looping sequence of our finest moments, of a mother in her old and capable body gesturing for you to come in.

Life is nothing but silverware; spoons of soft food, forks in the road, and knives to keep it all from being stolen.

I've tried to develop a system of remembering my mother, reaching as far back as I can remember and working my way to the front. This method seems to make the most sense and is surely the most logical to follow, but I do not have enough time. So, I'll begin with the

big events, the things that scare me the most. It helps to know that I am not remembering these circumstances alone, and in this place of comfort I will begin.

We lived in the country with mostly picture-books. Trees, and meadows, with no crowds. Three hundred days of sun.

It has been recommended to me to remove all of my mother's belongings or things that remind me of her from my home. I have gotten as far as placing all of her things into a large black garbage bag, so instead of the diluted sense of loss that was once spread throughout the various rooms in my house at low and manageable frequencies, it has since all collapsed into one fine concentrated point like a ripened black hole vectoring me into an unstable aggregate of memory that smells of musty matches, that instead of flame, take me back to the beginning of time with none of my current knowledge, so the Big Bang and cosmic comets flashing across the dark fields not only overcome my body with supernatural senses of awe, but also take me away from a world and life in which I've invested so much time that when the seconds stack past the clouds and coulds and should haves, and all is to be added up, the sum amounts to a moment of forgetting.

Let's return to the map. I have never forsaken it. And here I must stress a strange

characteristic of the scroll, which by now must become clear to the reader; it unfolds while being read, its boundaries open to all currents and fluctuation. In its corners are small rips and abrasions that have not always been there and which I attribute to negligence and poor handling. The issue being that I have developed a kind of obsession in the maintenance of these maps, and by which I would never let such careless erosions occur. Thus, I have concluded that there is another who has accessed these scrolls, someone with smudgy, amateurish fingers, with poor vision and a tendency to twitch in moments that demand the keenest stillness, like a botched surgeon's hand, someone with utter disrespect for things of a delicate nature such as this map that will painfully wither away piece by piece through a series of malevolent mishandlings if nothing is done about it.

Though, it is possible that I am the one who has damaged my mother, that despite my careful procedures I have unknowingly allowed her to deteriorate, and perhaps nothing can be done to prevent this. Like the slow onset of age that mostly goes unnoticed until one day we look up at the mirror and examine our reflection with a little more scrutiny, we squint our eyes as if we weren't fully certain of ourselves, of our shape in the mirror that has over the years turned into something else entirely. Something worn, and used, and the signs of wear are apparent. There is no longer the sense of pride one gets in growing up, but rather a distasteful sense of contempt for the figure you have grown into. And now that you're here, you realize there was nothing you could have done otherwise. That choice isn't really something to choose and that all choices led to this form of yourself sunken in and spilling from your bones.

Maybe the map of my mother was never intended to last, as her body was not intended. It may be the very act of remembering that is destroying her. It may be that remembrance itself is damaging, and piecing her together in this way requires she turn to pieces. If this is the case, I will remember my mother into oblivion, only to bring her back a stranger composed of sentences strung together by anonymous readers who will take her all for themselves. If I succeed she will cease to be my mother and perhaps become yours. She will embody another form such as a map, or a book of maps we select from a high-reaching shelf and blow off the dust, a book we hold and call our mother. A book that is the product of a different self from the one manifested in her habits, in society, in her vices. A book that does not bother to reconstruct how she was in different circles, but rather who she was in our inmost depths. This is the closest I come to touching her again. It's the things that touch the skin that give us memory. And here we are again, remembering, dismembering.

I do not know if my mother has died and this is what troubles me. I imagine her reading this someday and wondering the same thing. She might ask, "son, where have I gone?" or, "where am I now?" or, "where are you?" and I'll look all around as the sun drops to crack open the night, as flamboyant purples gather behind the bare oak and elms, and the sparrows hang in the tangled branches chattering like tambourines, and I've never been this clumsy before, looking for a body to assign my mother. And if there is no body to be found, no one to beckon to come, she will wail in the trees outside of windows while living people will look out and say, "what a windy day."

To be a living person is sometimes to be at a disadvantage. Since we are our bodies, to live is to see, or to sense in a way that is defined by our bodily parameters. We can not sense before our lives begin, or after they are gone, so they say, so these restrictions hold us within a certain scope. This scope is called 'a life.' We spend eighty-seven percent of our lives inside of buildings. That is, we spend our lives inside bodies we primarily use to live inside buildings, which is another name for body. And the layers might continue. How am I to say my mother is not alive if all she has done is acquire another layer?

How are we so convinced that death is an outward departure? That the vibrations a spirit is made of somehow leave the body behind when it is no longer capable of functioning. Can spirits leave before this point of failure? And if they can, why do they wait? What if they never leave, but instead burrow, like an arctic fox in the snow so deep inside, the body grows cold and unresponsive, like an intense dream, severed from the world, on a return journey into ourselves. This is a total regression into the earliest stage of life, which is the primal and perhaps truest state, like simplifying the fraction buried within each self and finding the common denominator, in which death brings us to the roots; and in its depths we disintegrate again into black murmurs, confused purring, a multitude of unfinished stories.

I have seen my mother many times, often in the shapes of other women with similar contours walking across a city street in the distance, walking quickly, as if to get away, as if

to get away from me, and I'm out of breath bent over my body at the corner of memory and monotony. I've gotten as far as touching one of these imposters on the shoulder, touching gently, tapping, like ringing a bell, closing my eyes so as not to spoil the moment of imagining, when my mother turns to face me, and I meet those beautiful glossy eyes like burnt coffee beans, and the stranger stands there as an empty page, piqued from the selfish gesture, and if only they knew what it meant to me, to stop and turn for a stranger, for one false look.

Conversations with my mother have rolled down to near silence. We use words with few letters, small language. I ask her questions by name, of little things about the weather and her weekly calendar, whether she has anything up-and-coming she would like to share, to which she is the most despondent. I then ask her about the big things, about my father and brothers, to which she closes her eyes, and if left unprovoked, will not remember to open them. I imagine her thumbing through the manila files in her mind, of the moments that rewrite one's life, and place it on another line in one's ever-spiraling trajectory. I have an idea of what she thinks about when we talk of our family based on my own relationships with them. But I'll never know them like she knows them. I'll never access my mother like she accesses herself. And this is true of anyone really; I'll never know another the way I know myself. But I feel as if my mother knows me deeper than even I can discover. The way she slowly lifts her eyes to me, and that look can pierce all the way through like an arrow. I am convinced I can hide nothing from her, that she knows all my thoughts and confidentially shakes her head at them, as a way to let me know she is listening. So I put

myself at her disposal, completely and without reservation. And she accepts this by almost imperceptibly closing her eyes. It happens without a word, with one single look.

I have arrived at a strange grid that contains my childhood home. The grid resides within a square mile, transforming the verdant country that was once there before it. Various patches of the grid are undeveloped, containing either large mounds of dirt, or enormous excavated holes the size of commercial parking lots where the soil and rock have been removed. The country in which we lived, and in which I grew up, has now become a gated community with wide, paved streets and a high, wrought-iron fence with an electrical entry. Just outside the entry gate is a console with a large screen that illuminates when approached. The screen is white and blank, and the static shocks my finger when I just about touch it. My finger leaves behind a black dot for a moment, the dot disappears, and a red bulb flashes in the corner of the console. The screen returns to white as before. I trace a line on the screen and pull my hand away, a black line is pictured in the same path. Again, the line is erased, the red light, the screen reset. I sign my name in cursive on the screen, it seems to hover there for a moment longer than the previous attempts, perhaps searching for a matching pattern in its database, but again the red light flashes, the screen dies black, and the sound of the gate double-bolting.

Through the spaces in the gate I can see a number of houses on either side of the street where small children have left their plastic toys and rested their bikes in their yards, the inverted wheels spin from the wind. My childhood home is situated at the end of a cul-de-sac located deep within the grid, though remains in view if I squint to make it out. From here it seems the front door has been left open. I press my face to the bars of the gate,

leaning in as far as I can as the iron chafes against my temples. I'm squinting hard now. Yes, the door is wide open, and not a single light is on. My first thought was to climb the gate, but after a few attempts to hoist myself up the long, slick bars I gave it up. My hands pressed red and creased from the ridged metal. I close my eyes and picture myself in front of the house.

To make your way in you must first climb a narrow set of slouching stairs with wavering wooden rails which the receding stain has left exposed sharp tongues of wood. You must step without using your arms for support. There's a fair amount of stairs so that by the time you reach the last few, you need to take a rest between strides. The strides become a little easier if you step with one foot, then bring the other up to the same stair to rest for a moment, before stepping again, rather than using one foot per stair and passing out from the loss of breath before reaching the top. The last step to reach the top is the largest stair, and is easily double the size of the rest. This is not an exaggeration. The size of the step is formidable and for good reason. It's a way of assessing how determined one truly is. I begin to climb the stairs as described, and upon my first step they have changed. Not the stairs themselves, but where they are located. I look toward the top where the stairs taper off, which seems to be a much greater distance than I once appraised, and my childhood home has completely vanished.

No house at all awaits at the top of the winding stair. I turn around and I'm much higher than I thought. I feel as if I've just begun and there are stories of stairs beneath me, as if I've

been climbing my whole life, and never stopped. The walls around me are bare with crisp outlines of blank shapes as if picture frames or portraits have been taken down, perhaps moved elsewhere, away from these formidable stairs that now offer nothing to look at. I squat down to sit and barely fit on the deck of the stair. I'm crouched over my legs and within arms reach of the walls on either side of me. The crisp outlines look clean, almost preserved, seeming to be made of a completely different material. I drag my hand against the wall, a rough crust of dust crumbles and lands on the stair in a small pile. I make larger swipes against it and solid chunks crack and chip away, a cloud of dust surrounds my head entering my mouth and nose. I cough and spit onto the stair, and with my heel rub the spit into the pile of dust creating a grimy paste. I then touch my hand to the clean, empty spaces on the wall which feel warm and much smoother in contrast to the surrounding material. I pull my hand from the wall and suddenly I'm in the stairwell of my childhood home. The stairs are carpeted and dirty from numberless steps of adventuring children marauding through the house. The sticky prints of small hands decorate the walls just under the wooden railings, smooth and polished. This is precisely how I remember feeling at home, in the evenings around the dining table, with the milk bubbles in cups, and my mother in her space at the table folding the whitest napkin like turning back a page.

I am free to move about the stairs, and do so with relative ease, though the stairway is much more cramped than I remember. I don't stand up all the way as I continue my climb to the first landing. This is where the front door is located, swung open and held there by a large construction cone. I find it strange and out of place, but nevertheless, move on. A rack

of wet coats rests in the corner dripping onto the tile, the smell of lily pad and pond water. I can hear children laughing, no doubt my brothers, possibly meddling with the neighbor's cats dressing them in infant clothing and adding Pop Rocks to their bowls of food. They are the ones that taught me that a lie is not so much the opposite of the truth, but an iteration of it. And of the times we would lie to our mother, my brothers made sure to meet with me in their bedrooms beforehand. They would each walk me through their alibis while I would stare blankly and nod my head. They said to think of it as storytelling, 'you love a good story, don't you?' They would take the mop out of the closet and drape it over their heads, then ask me questions about their stories in a dainty voice, teasing their wild hair, as they knew my mother would. We practiced until I got it exactly right. These trial runs instilled the utmost confidence in my brothers, and upon finishing them they would give each other an affirmed solid look, and hurry me out the door. And, as it turned out time and time again when confronted by my mother, in her master room, when she would get down on a knee and bring her head in close, her hand gently on my shoulder pressing the wrinkles from my shirt, wiping the residual lines of food from my face, pleadingly asking what happened, I was the absolute worst storyteller.

I am concerned for my mother's sanctity, for how she will be judged in the end. Her end has caused me to consider how she will be received.

We didn't know about the healing properties of water until we were said to have experienced them. Being born again wasn't so bad, just a little cold. After we came out of the water we were said to be new. We were cleansed and pure. I was ten years old.

I never fully understood what I was putting my body through. My brothers told me it was something I must do to get into heaven, and that if I didn't do it, I wouldn't get in, and if I didn't get in, I would never see our mother again. I assumed this was where my mother was going, heaven. A place with so much light, that a human body is said to burn to a crisp, skin and bone all gray like burned-out ashes if exposed. These are the tales of my brothers from which I learned first hand. Since the discovery of heaven and its incendiary qualities we have thought it necessary to leave our bodies behind before we make the journey. For some, the most difficult part is to choose to leave. To give up everything and everyone you know, for eternity. Though my brothers had me convinced I could get there with my body intact, so we read of the sacraments and headed to the water.

When we arrived at the embankment the elders were waiting, submerged up to their waists in the water. They kept on their shirts. Each held a wooden rosary wrapped around his hand, and attached to the beads swung the cross in a constant motion. Their shirts were soaked and stuck to their bodies showing their skin underneath. I remember turning to face the shore and seeing a crowd of people unable to make out any of their faces, not because I couldn't see them but because I didn't know any of them. I funneled my eyes and saw that every woman in the crowd was standing with her hands clasped together as if

their hopes and fears stemmed from the same gesture, and each woman standing there in the crowd was my mother, whose face had imprinted itself on mine and thus I could see her everywhere. The elders grabbed me by the arms, one rested his hand behind my neck to tilt me back. The beads of the rosary pinched my skin. I remember looking up to the clouds as I was being lowered into the water, they took up the entire sky in their billowy cylindrical shapes, and for a brief moment before I entered the water the world stood motionless, holding its breath, or perhaps it was me holding mine, and my mother did not appear in the clouds how I wanted or expected her to appear. Her body was fractured in cloud fragments that drifted apart like light dispersed through a prism, my mother's body was debris in the sky, etched in the contours of clouds. And the sun was not the sun but the back of my mother's head, the light whipped from her hair revealing the rest of her body tangled in the white masses like a silhouette on a white sheet, and she looked so clear as if seeing for the first time her original shapes, and tears welled in my eyes that did not move, for my head was parallel to the earth, and if it would have rained, I would have taken it as a sign from her. And when the world resumed, I broke through the mirror of water, and the only thing keeping me alive was a stale, held breath.

Sometimes the past is the past, and you don't want to touch it.

Since I cannot access my childhood home, I have investigated the whole area around the gated residential community. It is nothing like when I was a child, and in many ways the opposite. The forest has been decimated to stumps, and the animals have abandoned their

sanctuaries to relocate, except for the murder of crows that patrol the empty fields. I have walked several times around the high gate that surrounds that vast terrain, taking note of the clearings and plots that have been repurposed for private estates. I have seen the white walls of the neighboring houses with their terraces and broad verandas from all angles. Behind my childhood home spreads an industrial park and, adjoining it, a large plot of land without any trees. Strange structures, partly factories, partly farm buildings stand there. I framed my eye between the bars in the gate, and what I see must be an illusion. My mother is sitting in her chair on the front porch of our home with her hand cupped over her eyes to shield from the glare of the sun as if she's observing something moving in the distance and it's me, I'm moving steadily in her general direction and this moment feels the same as when she first looked upon me as if being watched was the same as being loved, and it's been so long I can't place her gaze in my memory, I just experience the moments that continually slip away like water poured through a colander and I'm positioned underneath without a cup to catch the splitting streams so I cradle my hands together and collect what I can and when the water stops being poured I raise my hands to drink.

My head is splitting from contradictory thoughts. I must consult the map again.

My mother is all gray. Her dark complexion has a tinge of burned-out ashes. The touch of her hand must be unimaginable.

I know there must have been a day when my mother held me like the sun. Perhaps a string of days. Some moves provoke endless patterns. I saw myself, as I had many times before, crawling as an infant through the country grasses, following my mother's wild hair catching a flurry of breezes luminous with pinpricks of light, and the falling leaves at the breaking of Autumn that would cover her in anonymous piles if I let them. And my brothers are there too, moving much quicker, with sticks in their hands on their heads, tramping through the piles of leaves, infiltrating the forest line, the rustling of shrubs and snapping of twigs under their trotting, childish steps. I am doing my best to follow their movements, but I can not keep up. Instead, I follow their tracks.

For weeks I have been hanging around the crested wrought-iron gate. I began referencing the maps to sketch out the most direct route to my childhood home. Strange architectures lined the streets of the neighborhood. All the windows and doors had green sunshades drawn over them. But this was not indicated from the maps. There are inconsistencies between the drawings and the actual places they represent. A map can never actually depict a place. All it can hope to do is get close enough. This is troubling when thinking of the map of my mother, which, if anything like the houses, must be lacking in detail. It isn't comforting to be 'close enough.' What is close enough anyway? What is approximately my mother? This is where I will get hung up, where I will open every door to find her and instead of finding her in that way she stands with her knees soft, as if she were always prepared to catch me, instead of finding that spot on her midriff that fit flush with my

howling head, I am cordially welcomed by another version of her who is ruthlessly vacant, a shell of what I can remember.

I can't determine if my memories are unreliable, or if my memories are accurate and I'm the unreliable one.

I'm becoming suspicious of my narrative procedure. Can I find a way to describe my mother without using much detail to withdraw my feelings about her? You might ask why I would do this. There are advantages to writing without feeling too deeply, without really saying anything, but circling around it, until the thing being written about is no longer the object in which the writing is being led, but it turns out the writing is the thing that is changing the object. Once words are assigned, and a story is made, the objects that once took up space in the room are only there when described, as in the story, when nothing is ever really there, but we talk as if it were, and if I can talk and point to things in space, then they might as well be there; even if I cannot touch the objects, I can talk about touching them, which is why there is no substitute for experience, and also no substitute for describing it, and if we're both reading the writing about objects that are never really there, but we read of them as they were, then we both can start to feel the doors of subjectivity unhinge, where the objects can now be seen through the open frame, and even if these objects are empty and meaningless, even if we say we saw quite different objects, at least we can agree and say we saw something.

If I do not pull back a little, I feel as if I will be writing a story that would betray my mother, turning her into a character. Then again, who isn't one? We must be characters, either in our own stories, or someone else's above us. It's the only way to explain the happenstance of living. We are led to think we control our narratives until some tragic accident, or diagnosis, or karmic consequence, only then do we fall to our knees to pray. But, what is religion if not a group of characters? Each one as fallible as the next. And, when a character dies, we are consoled in knowing their life was purposeful, even if we do not believe this of our own, and another is created. When my mother dies, there is no another. Perhaps these sentences don't apply to my mother, but to any mother, or to the biography of a woman with my mother's particular life.

I tell this story almost entirely in quotes to keep my mother's language close together in the air. I'm sitting across the table telling the story aloud, forever signaling these lines with my hands.

In general, these memories are inhabited more by things than by people: wooden spoons of different lengths to serve food, or something else, an attic full of empty garments and dusty memorabilia, bags with leather straps for handling the weight of leaving. These things are the objects in which I was just describing, and if you were seeing them in person you would not be reading this novel. And since you are reading this novel, I encourage you to imagine these objects in a neutral space, placed close together, so you might conjure some

connection between them. A couple of spoons next to garments with no one in them next to a swollen piece of luggage. What happens to a spoon when it is not being held? What are garments when they are no longer worn?

My memories of these places have all seemed to collapse into one abyssal plane. And channeling within this plane are the specific places themselves; the cafe, the grid, my childhood home, each with their own smells and colors, but all emitting the same elliptical level of brightness like a week of cloudless sky. The lack of shape is disorienting. I can feel things moving from every direction, something cold as wind, though does not come in gusts. Drawing nearer the cafe, I've noticed something peculiar about the women sitting at the outside table in their ruffling skirts. None of them are talking to each other. In fact, it's as if no one even acknowledges another's existence. It's apparent that each of the women are of a different age, teasing up various hairdos, fashions, and amounts of energy. Some interact with people passing by making polite conversation. One of the ladies, who I suspect to be the lead of them all, sits with her pen and daily paper miming out letters for the crossword, and sips her usual coffee from a mug she brings from home, and will often forget about it when she leaves. And upon her arrival the next morning, as the barista behind the counter pours her usual into her mug, she will say "oh! I have this same one at home."

These women are all my mother at different points in her life; the one with the long and teased hair seems to be the most familiar, perhaps in her early thirties, with her sunglasses

angled on top of her head pinning back stripes of hair from her face. She hasn't looked this young in years. I want to touch her, but with what hands? Am I even sure she is there to be felt? Perhaps this is the one place she can sit without being touched, without being told to feel. Perhaps this is the trouble of remembering places, that the objects within them are not separated by time and that the people in those places may shadow each other, sitting in the same chair at the same moment, growing darker and darker until even the chair is subsumed, and I'm picturing a conglomerate of bodies each splayed over the other until there are so many limbs and sets of eyes I can no longer locate a single kind. I can no longer determine who my mother even was, and in a way she has too many bodies, as if she's been everything, and everything she's been has grown old and turned into an object I hold in my hand: a map.

I am making my rounds by the grid still along the outside of the gate. As I'm walking I drag my hand across the bars letting my fingers flap at the metal numbing my hand. I do this until my hand is swollen and I can no longer feel it. I'm taking interest in the empty spaces of the grid, and have tallied seven total, of all different sizes and depths. I'm approaching the largest of the empty spaces, which has the shape and depth of a crater, in which the ground surrounding the space punches in and descends gradually, and from my vantage on the outside of the gate, I cannot see what lies within the space. I'm left to fill it in with my imagination; the crater has become a park of mud and clay where the children of the community go to build castles out of plastic buckets of water and dry dirt, mixing the two together with their impish hands to forge their own tiny kingdom in the crater, and the

parents stand way back with clipboards if there are parents, leaving the children to their own defenses, where they learn and sculpt social behaviors that mock the real world, also made of mud and clay. The crater has become a mystical hot spring among the most mystical hot springs on the planet that attracts travellers from far and wide to soak in its geothermal waters, which would explain the gating off of the community, and the countless wanderers grasping and peering through the bars. Or, perhaps the crater has become entirely empty, and its only purpose is to balance the areas around it. If it were to be filled, the entire grid would topple and fall apart from an imbalance of Earth. This crater provides a release, a counterpoint to the buildings stacking on the surface piling higher and higher. There comes a point when some things must grow down. That is the purpose of this crater, to grow as far down as buildings are high, and each new building requires the hole to deepen. This is the hazard of the community as well. The more people wish to build, the larger the hole becomes, and the threshold is not a number they know but is a number.

I can see in the middle of the grid a pair of gentlemen in black morning coats and top hats walking through the community with the measured steps of diplomats. They're walking down the street together, periodically hiking their trousers or turning out their pockets, as if proving to the other they have nothing to hide. Their white shirt fronts glare in the humid air. They continue to look in silence at the rows of houses, as if valuing them, and walk with slow, rhythmic steps. They have coal black mustaches on carefully shaven faces with oily eyes, which I imagine turn in their orbits smoothly. From time to time they doff their hats and wipe their brows. They are both slim, tall and middle aged with the flashy look of

gangsters. One of the men stops jerkily between strides and plants his feet together, as if a high-ranking officer were walking nearby. The man is looking intently in the distance. I imagine him to be a man who carries a small brass spyglass on his person, in one of his deep lined coat pockets, along with other various trinkets; an old pocket watch, with a small faded portraiture of his beloved under the lid, perhaps a kazoo or harmonica dripping spittle from the teeth. The man has none of these things, but squints his eyes to focus on his object in the distance. Upon spotting it he immediately begins to run, though without pumping his arms. He is instead gripping the brim of his top hat so as to keep it from falling. The other man is watching a thin plastic straw drag across the sidewalk in a slow, steady motion. He drops to one knee and realizes the straw is being carried by a trio of ants. He lays down on his stomach to watch them move at eye-level, their legs doubled as arms hoisting and transporting the straw. He is completely enamored by their efforts when he hears the first steps of his partner bolting down the road, and without a word or holler, pops up to his feet, and without dusting himself off, stumbles after the other in a high-spirited chase.

Deep in thought, I quickly walk the short distance back to the great iron gates, and wait until someone either enters or leaves. I take a seat on the ground near some weeds sprouting between the gate. Flowering from the weeds are what look to be like old thorns, the kind that looks sharp but crumbles between the thumb and forefinger. The dusty ochre caked over my fingers is the kind of country in which I grew up, the place we all fit, where we poured water into rusty tins and then stuck the poor flowers in. I pluck a dead strand of

weed and place it in my mouth to chew. The taste is so faint, I could almost make it out to be anything. It's the country grasses that make the cow so delicious. This only reminds me how long it's been since I last ate. My mouth waters from the thought of juicy berries, saccharin roots and nuts, simple things to spot and harvest. Out here, it isn't all red meat and poultry, it's really whatever you find. The true taste of any food is one flavor. It's all to keep you alive.

I'm sitting with my back against the wrought-iron fence, staring off into the distance. The bars cradle my back and my skin bunches through the bars. I press my body back against the fence to see if I could squeeze myself through, but my body and head are too big, otherwise I could fit.

There isn't much to look at away from the grid. The horizon line undulates from the sun and bounces off the asphalt of the winding road connecting the community to another commercial district with a dense concentration of buildings. Between is nothing but desert and weeds. The buildings are perhaps a hundred miles away, far enough to keep me from walking there, but I can see their lines grown into the sky. If the ground had limbs, reaching or extending a gesture to the sky, they would be these buildings. From this distance they are bunched together, almost on top of each other, or huddled so close they recycle each other's warmth. The buildings are the warmest part of the city, they're designed to keep the heat in, which is the people, huddled in the thousands in these buildings. Naturally, the buildings follow and huddle themselves. Some buildings are not close together at all, but

from a distance it's as if they're rubbing shoulders and speaking in private. As you move closer to the buildings, they begin to drift apart, as if they see you coming and disperse, feigning their disinterest. Which is what seems puzzling about the map. When I look at the lines on the paper they seem tightly wound and intricate, each mark in close relation with the others. But, when I continue my search in the world there is so much more space than indicated. I don't have enough life to search for my mother in scale.

Lying against the fence, baking in the soon-high sun, I undo the buttons of my shirt starting from the bottom, so as I make my way up the spine of the shirt it opens wider and wider like a cape. I leave the collar button attached, and loosen the knot on my tie. Now I'm in full costume with my fists raised for flight, or perhaps to smash through the fence with my bare hands. But these acts are more mentally demanding than I remember. As a child, make-believe was the ability to create a belief and place it in the world, to apply an alternative set of constraints. Now the things I make are too big, clunky, would never fit here. They're too misshapen to be contained in mere facts. They are merely *trying* to occur, they are checking whether the ground of reality can carry them. And if it cannot, they quickly withdraw, losing their integrity, dropping a thing or two in the process, in these attempts at incarnation. And they'll break before they fully form into the world, which cannot be said to be a failure, because when a thing becomes complete it is obsolete. Which is a way to share what I'm writing, and not what I've written. Each time I sit down to write I feel as if I'm writing the entire story over again, with words that look and sound the same, but they are yesterday's words, and today's are coming much faster as if they know the

page in which they settle and treat it as if it were home, at least temporarily.

The heat is taking its toll. Its enormous golden globes are swelling all over the horizon; I can see the one tree in the country plain withering all the way through, and at the very tips of its branches are little wafers of greens and yellows that flake and settle on the winding road. I can see shimmering in the air the distant bell tower of the church outlined clearly, as if through the lenses of binoculars. I can see my brothers standing near a body of water no bigger than a parking space and they're prodding at each others shoulders to force the other one in, and the word COMPACT comes to mind when looking at them squirm around the space on their burning toes, though in the form of a verb, and it's true, the body of water is shrinking as they argue. I try calling out to them, but the words disintegrate as I open my mouth and the particulate powder lumps with saliva forming a stone I pinch from my palette and set on the ground. I spend a great part of the afternoon pulling and stacking pebbles, my brothers dancing around an evaporating body of water, and the church bell tolling on the hour, every hour, but the sound doesn't reach me until well after the hour has passed, so I'm calculating in intervals the amount of time it takes for the sound to reach me once the bell has begun to move: one mississippi, two mississippi, three mississip. It takes three mississip to reach me.

Because the pebbles are really letters, or something like letters, I begin to arrange a tactile alphabet out of the stones I pull from my mouth. The number of pebbles is not as important

as the shape and weight. It reminds me of drawing in Japanese. I do not draw in Japanese, but it reminds me of it. How the lines that create a shape are only lines until complete, and if the lines don't create a shape, there is no way to utter them. So the shape, or character, in Japanese becomes the base unit of meaning, like the soul. It can't split into parts, but is a part. There is no discernible difference between the pebbles I have produced from my own body and the ones that were already spread over the ground. In fact, there is no way to tell between what I have created and what I have not, and in a way it doesn't bother me because it's all language anyway, but in a way it does bother me; if I create a pile with someone else's pebbles, what becomes of their pile? Or perhaps, the pebbles don't belong to anyone and I'm producing yet another uninhabitable project.

I had to teach my mother about her life from the very beginning. Toward the end her memory was very poor. I had to recur elements of love and hate, the books she was fond of and the ones she was not, but already on the following night she did not remember anything. Other members of my family tried to help her, to prompt the reactions she should show; her reeducation advanced slowly, step-by-step. She had been very neglected, internally ravaged by the hired attendants, yet in spite of this I finally succeeded in making her reach out her arms at the sound of my father's name. She nearly fell from her chair from leaning so far, just wanting to be held.

My memory recurs and I'm back on the first landing in my childhood home, the wet coats

on the rack have dried and shriveled a little, looking smaller or lighter than before. The corresponding puddle has evaporated and left behind thin lines of sediment. The front door is closed and locked, though I did not close nor lock it. The large construction cone that was once propping the door open has since been removed, though the skeleton of a small solid circle free of dust remains where it once had been. Attached to the landing are two sets of stairs, one continuing up through the house and the other down to where I first entered and began my ascent. The stairs are now made of wood that doesn't hide the dirt as well, and I can see someone has dragged some in from the yard, and judging from the pigeoned gait of the prints, it must be my mother, or one of my brothers, though which one I am uncertain. Usually, they are found together. The prints are heading both up and down, as if multiple trips were made, and I must choose which direction to travel before I dry out of this memory. I can't help but think back to the times I've traversed these same sets of stairs, confronted with the same two choices, time and time again. But, now it is strange how old interiors reflect their decisive past, how in their stillness volumes of history try to be reenacted, how the same situations repeat themselves with infinite variations, turned upside down and inside out by the empty reasoning of wallpapers and hangings. And I've just become aware my brothers can no longer be heard marauding about. It is possible they have grown and left this place behind, or are hiding in the best places in the house, the very places they once showed me to hide.

I decide to walk up the stairs but somehow I've arrived at the bottom floor, turned around like an oyster inside a pearl. Stepping into the space it's as though I've entered a different

climate, different currents of air, the cool and familiar region of the family living room adorned with rows of shelves of picture frames, photographs of my parents as young adults next to photographs of us children the same age, albums of stamps never licked, a Louisiana license plate nailed to the high crossing of a support beam, though none of us had been to Louisiana. The room is furnished with a large L-shaped couch that can accommodate a party of four comfortably. There were five in our family so one of us had to sit on the floor, usually the one in the most trouble with my mother. Us boys stretched our legs out on the couch while my father ate his dinner on the carpet.

The living room was one of the coldest nooks in the house. The windows were well covered by the shadows of shrubs planted on the outside in a raised garden bed with nuggets of bark around the bases. This barrier kept the heat out, so on those three hundred days of sun our family would flock downstairs to settle our body temperatures, which became counter productive, everyone in the same room breathing, offering their heat. Air conditioning was reserved for a three hour window later in the evenings, when the first of us would go to bed, so at least we could get to sleep without sweating. Even if later we woke up in sweat, it was better than starting the night in this way. But, my mother did invest in a few standing propeller fans positioned throughout the room so no matter where you stood, or sat, or laid, you were always in the path of the air. The blades of the fans could be adjusted when the fans were standing still, but I cannot remember a time when they needed adjusting. It took my mother hours to coordinate the flow patterns of the fans so each would oscillate in sync, and once she found the proper arrangement, the fans never

had to be touched. Of course, as kids we couldn't resist touching them.

On top of each fan was the dial that controlled the speed of the propeller. My brothers took their stations behind their fans and tilted their heads toward the cage and spoke my name in long, held breaths, twisting their dials to splice the sonics of their voices, and blow my little mind out of the water. I had never heard them like this. They shuffled their feet as the fans twisted to keep their voices muffled, moving like shored crabs to spray their voices throughout the room, as I sat in the center and laughed.

My mother would spend her weekends downstairs in the living room, nestled in the corner of the sofa with a heavy, purple duvet and tumbler of iced tea she brewed at home. Ever since we showed her how to use streaming television, this has become her most desired activity. If I was at home I was upstairs reading a book. A book that was not my mother, but was like my mother in that I was reading the book the way my mother had taught me. So, it was like reading with my mother, and at times I would hear her voice instead of mine. I read the book aloud to hear her clearer. The book was *The Apple in the Dark*, or was like an apple in the dark and midway through her sentences my phone would ring. "Yeah, mom?"

"Hey, sweetie. Do me a tiny favor?"

Through the phone I hear her rattling the bare ice in her tumbler.

“Is it too early for wine?” she jokes.

Off near the side of the road, maybe a hundred paces away, a thin swarm of flies gathers in small bunches. The heat sharpens the metal on their abdomens making them shine.

Beneath them lies a shape on the ground, though of what kind I cannot tell from this distance, but judging from the amount of flies, it must have arrived recently. I haven't been bothered by flies sitting against this fence, though I'm sure my smell is ripe for their tastes, and while I may wreak of a certain delicacy for the flies, I have the ability to defend myself. It seems that whatever lay on the ground ahead lays there still and indefensible, perhaps bound by the hands and feet, or unconscious. I cannot see a head. Its figure seems entirely round, and small, though I am still looking from afar. Squinting my eyes only develops the veil of the swarm and I cannot see through.

I turn over on all fours and face the fence, grabbing the bars to steady me. The metal begins to burn and I shake my hand free, spitting in my palm then press it against my bare chest. My shirt is still open and covered in dust from the ground. I begin buttoning up the placket to the collar while watching this shape in the distance be eaten by flies, and I seem to have too many buttons. The bottom button is misaligned and fastened in the wrong hole, so I must unbutton and re-button again. This time I button slowly with great care, as if dressing for a momentous occasion, such as a funeral or inauguration, watching my hands force each nib through, and in the amount of time it takes to sort my shirt the number of flies

surrounding the shape has doubled. A furious mass hangs in the air above, buzzing in full hums, while a few at a time descend to smother the shape, then return to the swarm, and another batch departs, as if they were taking turns gorging on this shape on the ground growing larger as I approach. I can make out the rear of the shape and it seems to be some sort of animal, perhaps hit by a car, with its legs pinched together and its body distended, a small bushy tail on its backside. The flies continue to graze on the body. I walk up close enough to see the poorly formed antlers on the head, small, not completely hardened. I'm surprised by the lack of blood, only a thin line from its half face turned up to the sky. The eye black and softly bleeding like a cherry. A fly lands on the lid, and it blinks.

Instinctually, I drop to a knee and caress its hide with my hand. The body is warm from the heat and the hair bunches together and darkens with sweat. I swat at the flies with my other hand, glancing a few, and shooing more, though some continue to invariably land. I keep them from swarming its face. If I knew of a song that was apt to be sung I would sing it, though I feel at a loss for words. The only noise I can think of is, 'shhhh,' and put my ear to its mouth. I look all around, but I don't know what for. There are no cars on the road, and the gate is still shut. The fence spread in either direction, and the incessant buzzing of flies. I cup my hands around the mouth and nose of the deer, and try to put it down. But, the deer does not ask me to do this.

The days before my mother's death will be normal. Days where the alarm clock rings the same number of times as the day before. Days where her stubbornness or sense of humor

warrant the usual roll of the eyes, and her near complete loss of memory has become commonplace to everyone but her, still waiting for my departed father to arrive from the store with a handful of eggs he forgot to purchase the first time around. She means to make shortbread for my father's birthday in two days time, and she asks me to leave the butter out overnight to soften. My mother knows she's in a Home, until she doesn't, and she's peering out the window waiting for her brothers to arrive in their dingey pickup to take her to Susan Ballinger's house for supper. At times my mother is stuck in the mind of a teenage girl, and shudders at the lines in her hands. At times she doesn't know she's in a Home which isn't hers. She demands we take her back somewhere until she can't articulate where it is she wants to go back to, and becomes tired from thinking about a place that no longer exists inside her.

We convinced ourselves placing her in this Home was for her own safety, after the neighbors called. They were outside working in the yard when they heard the thud. They went next door, and after knocking a couple of times decided to let themselves in, and found her collapsed on the stairs. We never thought of blocking the stairs. We noticed she would take breaks half way up, resting her arm on the rail. "Mom?" we would yell, then hear her resume. Once, she decided to sit on the stairs and couldn't get back to her feet. I had five missed calls. She climbed the rest of the way on her knees.

Now when I notice a string of normal days I think about buying her something expensive, or writing her a poem she'll never understand, and I end up doing the latter because I'm

broke, but also because she enjoys poems she won't quite get the first time through, poems where she knows things will be missed, because in a way it's the not noticing that she can relate to. The skimming, or skimping, or skipping of words that nestle in the empty shelves of her mind where memories are bound like novel-length library books with their spines facing out, and they're leaning against each other aslant in the row because most have been checked out, and most are way overdue.

I couldn't manage to suffocate the dying deer on the road. Each time I came close it convulsed and twisted its head from my hands, so I had to start over. After a few tries I could tell I wasn't helping. I lay down next to the deer, mirroring it, so my limbs matched its limbs and our two shapes made an enclosure. About every couple of minutes I would put my ear to its mouth and check if it was breathing. I had wiped the thin line of blood from its eye with my shirt, which was black so the stain wasn't noticeable, not that the color of shirt mattered. Or perhaps it did. Maybe the fact I was wearing a black shirt today spurred me to care for this animal. If it were white, or striped, perhaps I would be here under different circumstances, or I wouldn't be here at all, and this deer would be fully alive feeding on low-hanging branches. Perhaps there'd be trees everywhere, and I'd be standing in the middle of a forest, where tufts of fern grow in every corner, and the fences were not fences but beds of bushes animated and entangled; and from its leafy walls big-eyed night creatures materialized and looked immobile under the light of a lantern with nothing showing in the bushes except a pattern of shining, bulging eyes.

As my mother's memory worsened, she had a difficult time finding the right words for her sentences. She would be in the middle of speaking a sentence and draw a blank. She had been known to do this every once in a while, but slowly she began to lose her words with more consistency, until every sentence was met with a long, painful pause that turned her blue in the face and changed her mood. For a while after we noticed this, we agreed to only speak in yes or no questions; "are you home?" "can we come over?" "did you take your medications?" In person we'd ask how she was doing, and sometimes she'd say 'yes' and sometimes 'no.' We assumed 'yes' meant good, and 'no' not so good, until we'd ask things like, "are you in pain?" Or, "how long have you been lying here?" in which 'yes' meant not so good. We knew she couldn't live with only a couple of words.

Within a few days we had sought counsel from an unlicensed professional who claimed to specialize in this sort of thing. It was one of those desperate friend-of-a-friend situations. We met in a twin unit commercial building next to a popular pretzel shop, and every now and again a stranger, or strange couple, or family would come through the door, the shapes of two little children piling through, and the sunken expressions on their faces when peeping their heads through the dangling strings of beads, asking if we had the pretzels, and my mother frankly saying 'no.' The 'professional' stood tall, but not so tall as to seem daunting, but tall enough to seem in charge, and escorted the diminished children back through the beads and pointed them, along with the supervising adults, in the proper direction, then locked the door, and we continued our meeting without interruption. The

'professional' suggested my mother begin to speak in full sentences again, (which upon hearing the news made her sit up in her chair and nobly wag her head) and when she encounters a word she cannot grasp, instead of reeling end over end for the ghostly shell, replace it with the name of a *fruit*; any fruit, her favorite fruit, or least favorite, depending. We spent the rest of the session looking at cartoon pictures of fruit with the names printed in bright bold letters at the bottom. We received a packet of flashcards with the various fruits, as well as a few blank cards for her to create her own if any of her favorites, or leasts, were left out.

The head of the deer was cradled in my hands when it died. There was a breath, then there was no breath. There were parts of me that wanted to cry, though not every part of me. Some parts were thinking about what to do next, while the rest of my body was heavy and slouching. I was torn between doing something and doing nothing, and ended up thinking, which I guess can be said to be nothing, but not to me, I knew it was neither something nor nothing, but something else entirely, and it's this something else I'm trying to write. When the deer had died, it looked the same as when it was dying, and this thought made it difficult to have eyes. I no longer wanted to use them. I thought, what's the point if the things that I'm seeing are not going to tell me the truth. I knew it was indeed dead, but not from looking at it. I wonder if I stayed set up against the fence without ever approaching the shape I would have noticed the moment when it passed. And now the parts of me thinking about what to do start to move, and I'm dragging the body of the deer through the dust while the other, heavier parts of me are still trying to sit down so I'm dragging the

dead deer with my knees bent near ninety degree angles as if I were sitting in a chair with the wheels rolling me back, but instead of kicking to push off I'm really stepping—the weight of the deer in front pulling me down to the ground, and there are more parts of me resisting this pulling than there are letting go.

My mother has asked me about my pickles, and I'm trying to take her seriously. The first thought that comes is whether a pickle is classified as a fruit, whether it was on one of her flashcards or if it was one she created on her own, and if pickles are something she likes or something she dislikes, or something she previously disliked but now is starting to like, or something she previously liked and are now becoming harder to stomach. This is all one thought. Or, these are the lines that occur in the space of one thought, and I'm attempting to answer these questions for myself while keeping my mother in mind, or keeping her amongst the space that these questions inhabit, so as not to lose sight of her relation to them, because asking these questions without her there might seem trivial or childish, but asking these questions with her there seems of the utmost importance. Will it hurt her to say, "mom, pickles aren't a fruit?" Even if I bypass this distinction of fruit and non-fruit, what does she mean by pickles? **My** pickles? A plurality with no specific number, other than more than one, and now I'm guessing as to how many pickles I have, assuming they're mine, without even knowing what I'm counting or where to locate them to start a count, and the feeling is like trying to deceive time but instead being deceived by time, or being described by time, when I'm continuing to count without even knowing what it is I'm counting: what is a day? Or a week? What do you think about months, and years? What are

you really counting? And what do we do with the numbers? Are they really ours? And I'm so hung up on pickles, I lose track of my mother in the room waiting for a response.

I've been dragging this deer through the dust on what I believed to be a direct line to the withered tree, but either the tree has moved or my sense of 'direct' or sense of 'line' is crooked. One look at the tree reminds me of how stuck it truly is, though I don't imagine the tree would think of itself in this way. I'm not sure trees have the words for this idea of being fixed, or jammed in one place. To the tree remaining in place is a way of life. The tree doesn't have to move to feel movement, and it doesn't have to move to grow. To the tree growing is something you do when you're still. I'm facing away from the tree, facing the body of the deer, the road becoming thinner as I move. I'm losing my grip on the limbs from the sweat on my hands, but also the residual sweat of the body that doesn't continue to sweat, but has produced enough already to trouble me. I reach down and pick up a handful of dust and rub it into the limbs where I'm holding, then continue in this fashion, still facing away from the tree but with a firmer handle on the body. I feel that this is the proper way to escort a body, if there is a proper way. If I were to turn around and stand erect, grabbing the deer by the antlers and dragging as one would a wagon, or a sled behind me, then this deer may as well become those things instead of something which once had breath.

Dragging the deer as I am, while facing it, is a way to acknowledge its former sentience, and not just to acknowledge it, but also to be confronted by it. While turning around might bring me to the tree more directly, it may also turn this act, or series of acts, into a form of exercise in which I become more concerned with the amount of weight on my heels, or my

fatiguing muscles, than I am the proper burial of this animal, if there is such a thing as a proper burial, and I believe there is.

I deflect my mother's question and tell her to nevermind my pickles, and I instead ask her about hers.

"My what? *Pickles?*"

"You just asked me how my pickles were doing, and I said to nevermind them."

"Oh. Alright then. I won't mind them."

"Okay, so...Well, what about your pickles? How are they doing?"

"*My* pickles?" (Pulling at the blanket in her lap). "That's a little personal, don't you think?"

When my mother speaks her sentences using fruits or non fruits she usually speaks in a way where one could figure out what she means based on the language surrounding it. For

instance she'll say, "where did I leave my cantaloupe? I never leave the house without it." Which may seem rather vague, but it drastically narrows the list of her meaning down to the things she brings with her upon leaving the house, which she never leaves, but still finds a way to act as though she might, which keeps her searching for her cantaloupe. And confusion arose with the hired attendants when my mother began this technique, swearing and accusing them of moving her rhubarb, "I left it right here," (pointing) to which the attendants scratched their heads and spent the rest of their afternoon in my mother's living space looking through all of the cabinets and behind the creases of furnishings for actual rhubarb. And come evening when the rhubarb could not be found, and a chain email to all the employees was sent, and a note was made in my mother's file, and I was left a pair of voicemails pertaining to the issue at hand, the first of which went something like:

"Hello, Mr. ----- . This is Theresa calling from the ----- of ----- Home. This message has been flagged as threat level yellow, and does not require your immediate response. Shortly after breakfast this morning your mother seemed to have lost her, rhubarb? and we can't figure out what she means. Do you know what she's referring to? That's R as in roy, H as in horace, U and in uh..ukulele, B as in boy, not to be confused with roy, A as in alex, R as in rat, B as in bat, not to be confused wit...(beep).

The second of which: "Hello, Mr. ----. Theresa again from the ----- of ----- Home. This message has been flagged as threat level green, and does not require your immediate response. Good news, your mother seems to have found her rhubarb after all. But, do you know what she's talking about? We tried to ask, but, well...you know how she is. If you

could give us a call back and fill us in that'd be great. Remember, we do require all our residents to be up-to-date on their bi-monthly mental health questionnaires. Please refer to our ***Rules and Policies*** tab on our website at: w, w, w, dot, H as in hope, O as in oh, M as in...(beep).

I have managed to arrive at the withered tree, though I decided to leave the deer behind, if only momentarily, to trace my way back to it in a direct line, and then use this line as a more efficient guide back to the withered tree. I begin my journey back to the deer which is still marked by a swarming of flies, perhaps the same swarm, and I'm dragging a lame foot along through the dust so as to draw a well-defined path. The dust kicks up in clouds covering my lower body so the scene from afar may look like a man who is beginning to run so fast his legs are lost in the swirls of dust, but truthfully I've never moved so slow in my life.

I've begun to entertain the idea that my mother's dwelling (environment) is directly influencing her health. If she were with one of her sons would she be declining at this sort of rate? Is her decline inevitable, or would living with one of us actually see her improve? I've thought about testing this idea many times, placing her for a number of months in one of our homes and matching the same number of months in her current Home. However, we have already paid the yearly deposit, and once you decide to leave you are no longer guaranteed readmittance. So in a way my mother's well-being is completely governed by currency.

I have reclaimed the deer in my hands and begin to move backward along the line I drew in the dust. I'm bent at the back with my arms stretched out dragging the deer by a limb from both sets of limbs. As I'm dragging the deer its body erases the line engraved in the dust. Though in a way the line is not being erased; it is being made wider. The line is being raked into a path and I keep my head down to keep it straight. Within a matter of minutes I reach the shadow of the withered tree. The heat is less invasive and I'm able to rest while the body lays in the spliced shadows of the branches projected onto the ground. Fissures of light decorate the hide like a canvas. I begin searching around for something with which to dig, such as a wide flat stone, or even a large enough branch will do. The only rocks in sight are the stacks of pebbles I made near the fence, though none of those are sizable enough to dig. I look up from under the canopy of the tree—organized like a skeleton, and pick out a few branches to try and break. I climb the base of the tree to the first level of branches and begin kicking at them, stepping on them with my weight while holding onto the upper branches and jumping until they snap. I get a few to fall to the ground surrounding the deer. Holding on to the branches above, I pull myself back to the trunk of the tree. The wood is warm and chafes my hands, dried out from the looming sun, and small slivers easily shave from the branches. Some find their way into my palms. One slides right in the meat of my thumb making it harder to grasp the wood, so I take my time getting down. I can't be said to be thinking about much. There's a pain in my hands I'm trying not to think about, so it could be said that much of my effort is spent trying to not think. Though my hands aren't the only things I'm trying to not think about.

On the ground, the deer is where I left it, though the sun's shifting has drawn a whole new set of shadows through the branches. For a moment it looks as though ink has stained the hide, but the ink begins to move like a story being written. I pick up one of the branches broken from the tree, grip it with both hands and drive it into a shady patch on the ground. I repeat these motions five or six times before the branch breaks in two. I drop to my knees and take up the pieces in each hand and begin to dig—right, then left, clawing. The sand underneath is much cooler and slightly soggy. I take a moment to rub some on my skin, patting my arms and face, cooling the areas exposed to the sun. Loose grains adhere to sweat stuck to my body but soon dry and flake off, irritating my eyes. I stop digging to sort them out. The hole is no more than half a foot deep and only as wide as a dinner plate. My hands only throb when I stop digging, which motivates me to continue, though the sticks I've been using have whittled down and dulled. I fetch another branch and continue as I did before, standing with two hands driving the branch in the ground. Again the branch snaps, so I grab another. They continue to break through the evening.

There's no way to tell how long I've been digging this hole. It feels as though even the sun has deceived me. The light continues to pour through the tree's branches, though the sky is of a congruent brightness, and there is no way to tell where the sun begins and where it ends, as if I were inside of it and all around me was ceiling. The deer continues to be dead lying beside the hole, and if it were to be placed in the hole at this moment, either sets of hooves on its limbs or its antlers would be sticking out. I'm not far from finishing, and if I

stopped now the flies would be able to get to it, and who's to say someone wouldn't trip over the exposed limb or horn and proceed to dig it up?

I collect the fragments of branches that have previously broken and bundle them up in my hands. I use the handkerchief in my pocket to bind them together. This bundle of broken attempts is the most efficient tool so far, and I continue to dig at a much quicker rate. The displaced sand and dirt has mounded between the deer's body and the hole creating a barrier. I can no longer see the deer lying on the ground and for a series of moments I begin to forget who or what I'm putting in this hole.

My mother has lost interest in her personal matters and has stopped inquiring about them. All questions pertaining to her life have become empty phrases, and the answers are so stereotyped that there is no need to involve herself in them, let alone her *name*. And because her days are spent in unchanging association with the same things, they have become sacred to her. There is nothing else. She no longer has eyes for anything. Curiosity has ceased to become a characteristic. She has nothing to say about herself; even at the dinner table, on Thanksgiving holiday, when at least once a year there was an opportunity to reveal something about oneself, there was only a mumbling of catchwords she had heard others use, and the word "I" seemed stranger to her than a chunk out of the moon.

Her 'personal' life has ceased to develop altogether, is depersonalized except for dream

tatters swallowed up by the next instance of forgetting. Little remains of her individuality, and indeed, the word “individual’ is known by her only in pejorative combinations. She can’t seem to separate herself from any other. She has become a mirror of the person in front of her, reflecting the persona of any individual placed in the room, repeating their speech, miming their gestures, and if there is a group of people she becomes irritable. When family comes to visit together, we form a line out the door to see her. We use the time outside her room to catch up with each other.

This circumstance has brought my brothers and I closer, though as we continue to move up the line, and each of us takes our turn inside with her, and the first one to talk with her leaves before the second is finished, and the second leaves before I’m finished, and when I exit the room everyone is gone, or else I’m the only one who showed and there never was a line to begin with. All this has me thinking of my brothers, and the last time I saw both of them. They are not twins, but they are usually found together. It has always been this way. I often think of them as infants bundled in a swath of similar clothing, rolling around in a crib together. They are older than me, so this memory can not be possible. It has been hours since I’ve seen them, or what’s longer than hours? Years. It has been years. Though how many I have not seemed to count, or have kept track. I wonder if they have counted, if they keep calendars filled with red X’s on the days they have gone without seeing me. I would ask my mother about them, though she does not recall the names to which I am referring. To her, they do not exist at all, so they do not exist at all.

The hole is nearly finished. My body fits entirely inside if I crouch. I'm scraping at the side walls of dirt to make it wider and the layers of sand and soil crumble to my feet. I cup my hands to dig it out. I notice the large mound of dirt above the ground begins to shake, gently sifting small clumps to the base. I climb out of the hole and look toward the road. A string of large black suburbans are in transit along the winding road, heading toward the gate to the community. I quickly dust myself off, tucking in my shirt and patting down my pants. One at a time I shake out my shoes, and hop on a wobbly leg. I make my way around the mound of dirt to the deer, and drag the body to the lip of the hole. Over my shoulder I can see the suburbans fast approaching the gate. I kneel and roll the body into the hole which nestles it tightly on its backside and fold the deer over itself so its limbs get in the way of each other like needles in a needlestack, and its head faces up toward the sky. The suburbans are nearly to the gate. I take a look at the mound of dirt, glance back at the deer, and begin to run.

My mother has begun to get on her own nerves, her own presence has made her uncomfortable. The animal spirits that had once filled her whole body now show themselves only seldom; one finger of her heavy, listless hand will quiver, and instantly this hand will be covered by the other. There is a visible disgust in her very first gesture, looking up from whatever she happens to be doing, but one can not tell whether the disgust was directed at her struggles with her present occupations or at the person who interrupted her from completing them. It became easier for her to blame her delinquencies on the disruptions of others, rather than the reality of her regression. During the daytime, a

hired attendant enters her room regularly as a timely scapegoat for my mother's frustrations. And, the questions delineate in the worst way, not 'how are you feeling?' but 'are you feeling any better?'

The last suburban is entering the gated community and I am close behind. I've slowed my run into a steady trot, attempting to time my entrance through the gate before it closes and without drawing suspicion. As the last car passes through, the gate has remained open long enough for me to enter unnoticed. I take to one side of the asphalt and continue to walk deeper into the community toward my childhood home. From street-view the houses look almost identical. The layout of the doors and windows, the shapes and slants of the roof, the size of the front yard are nearly exact, though different coats of paint and trim decorate the outside. Every house has a single sapling growing in the middle of their lawn and a fence dividing the end of one property from the start of another. The windows on the sides of the houses are similarly aligned, so if the curtains are drawn one can see directly into the adjacent room. The term 'cookie-cutter' comes to mind and I can't imagine the kind of family that would prefer to live in these synthetic cells of community, and looking around, not a single youth or adult can be spotted. The houses are entirely empty. Out of curiosity I walk up through the yard of the closest home and peer inside the long window next to the front door. The room is bare and plainly white. There are no light fixtures, and the ground is gray cement.

My mother has lost the ability to pick up *tone*, in particular, sarcasm. We can no longer joke

with her. Teasing about her condition doesn't help her. She takes everything literally. For this reason I can no longer speak to my mother over the phone. I'll go to visit her and find her lying on her bed with such a look on her face that I don't dare go near her. She looks at me from far away as if I am some neighborly stranger, another passing her by. I had to leave the room. Only since then have I become fully aware of my mother. Before that, I kept forgetting her, or remembering other versions of her to deny what she has become. Now she imposes herself on me, takes on body and reality, and her condition is so palpable that at some moments it can become a part of me.

I have reached the street of my childhood home. The signage that marks the cul-de-sac has been swallowed up by mangy bushes and the faded words DEAD END can still be read against a worn yellow background. I walk straight down the middle of the street in no particular hurry. My body is exhausted but there is no point in stopping before I get there, or trying to move faster than I'm currently capable. I pass the first set of houses casually, as if this homecoming was typical, as if this particular return visit would play itself out like any other, and my mother will be in her chair carrying a tune. Looking further down the street I can see the taillights of one of the black suburbans, perhaps a neighbor just arriving home. I pitch to the side a little and see there are multiple suburbans, parked one in front of the other, wrapping around the right side of the cul-de-sac. These could not belong to one neighbor, maybe multiple? But, all with the same vehicle? That seems highly unlikely. Then, how have each one of these cars found their way to my street, and what could they be doing

here?

I've reached the end of the cul-de-sac and I stand in the center of the roundabout that banks up against the driveway of my childhood home. To my right are the black suburbans parked around the arc of the cul-de-sac leading back down the street. There are five suburbans in total. Each is freshly washed and shines in the light of the day and I can see through the windows all the way to the other side. No one is in them. I turn and look upon my childhood home for what seems like the first time and if it weren't for the footprints we made in the wet cement of the sidewalk when we were children I would not have recognized this place. '97 etched on the curb, almost eroded away. The house itself is in terrible condition. The lawn is overgrown and the various shrubs and trees have taken over the walkways. The stairs have shed their original stain and the railings have sagged to a point of disrepair. It's difficult to find a spot on the house that hasn't lost its integrity. Even the numbered address nailed to the siding has rusted and leans away from each other as if it weren't a group of numbers meant to be put together, but random values nailed to a wall. The nine has fallen to a six. In the front yard I can see a small depression in the grasses. I walk over and see that two morning coats, a pair of vests, collared shirts, and trousers are strewn over the ground. I walk over them and proceed to the backyard, where the gate is slightly ajar and taps against the wooden fence in the breeze.

I was writing a book about my mother when she died. It's hard to convince myself that writing it didn't kill her, that it was some other cause. It's easier to blame myself for her

death than something else out of my control. If I claim responsibility then at least I can say I took part in her departure, instead of standing back and letting it happen. Being involved and instrumental in her last moments offers a small consolation. Most don't get that chance. Most receive a phone call, and an emptiness in the stomach, and by that time it's already too late. I was able to write her to her grave, and whether she knew it or not, I'm sure she wouldn't have had it any other way.

The first things I see in the backyard are the half-naked asses of two grown men rolling around in the grass. They both have black mustaches and I now recognize them from before. When they see my face they both sit up and laugh. Of course! My brothers have met me here though I cannot remember making the arrangement. It all felt so real. I haven't seen them since the last time we visited our mother, and we formed a line. They wave me over and I walk up to them noting the changes in their faces. I drop to my knees, and upon hitting the grass it's as if I have waken up from a dream. I'm breathing heavily and I can't seem to regain composure. All I see are the blades of grass between my hands, propping myself up. I lean back and place my hands on my knees, utterly confused at where I find myself. I fight my way to my feet and rub the back of my head. Looking down there's a slab of cement with all types of flowers arranged around the base. I'm wearing my black suit and the tie crowds out my neck. I reach in and loosen it a little. Looking around, there are more slabs of cement equally spaced in a sort of grid, and I am in the center. The headstones are nearly identical, though some have flowers and some do not. Behind me is a row of black suburbans, and farther off in the same direction is a small gathering of people

under a green canopy. I hear one faint voice.

## *Poetics*

An Announcement:

It took me a while to conceive of my final thesis. They, as in UW Bothell, as in Jeanne, Rebecca, Amaranth, Sarah, Aeron, Renee, and Ted, not the least of which, Kate, without whom I wouldn't even be able to sign up for the damn classes; they all told me to choose something to write or draw or film or 'art' about for let's say one hundred, yeah one hundred pages of writing, or one hundred equivalent pages of some other art; sounds like a good number. Mind you, this is what we signed up for. We were aware of the final thesis when we decided to enter the program. "Sure," we say. "THESIS, all drawn out and chewy, the letters crowded our mouths.

First year, done. That quick, in the snap of a finger. All of the sudden I get that taste in my mouth again, "THESIS." The second year starts and I feel ready to write. Okay good, this is good, I'm going to sit down and write, and hey, words are coming, look they're coming out, there's that one and THAT one, they're everywhere! Wait..wait...they're slowing down...wh....why..where? Where did they go? They're gone...the words are gone. Every story I started and started and started, actually in most cases I couldn't even start. Until one day, in the beginning of March. Yes, ONE MONTH before the first draft of our THESIS is due and I'm no where. I'm in the desert and I'm seeing shit. OH, there! Over there! I see a story. And, I crawl over there and I look disgusting. My facial hair smells like the food I've been

eating all winter, which is the terrible-for-you food, my clothes are really tight-fitting and just sweat, sweat in all the places, you know the places (gestures to crotch, and behind, and between the thighs). Just that stench...okay, you get what I'm saying..FILTH. I reach the story in the desert and poof, gone. Pure fantasy. Actually, fantasy would've been great! Fiction, please, just give me fiction. But no... all I got was a rash...until that day in March. OH, what a day! I reached in my head where the poems were and I just started writing them out. I wrote what was in my head! It was revolutionary! It was about my mother, my mom. I don't know why. Why does anyone talk to themselves about their mother? I wasn't mad at her...I don't **think** I was mad. Well, at least what came out wasn't angry. It was rather gentle. It was reminiscent and warm. I liked where I was when I was writing about my mother. And then like any tender loving-son would do I asked myself, what if she **died**?

What a horrible thing to imagine! Right? Who would want to imagine that? Then I started to think about the reality of that scenario. Doesn't everyone go through this? Don't we all lose our mothers at one point or another? Don't we all get lost? And this question began to evolve and it became multi-faceted, so it was no longer what if she died, but **when** would she die, and what exactly would constitute her death? On my mother's side of the family we have a history of memory loss. My mother is going through this right now with her mom; my grandmother has been with dementia for a number of years, and instead of witnessing her unraveling, I experience it **through** my mother, observing her as a person who is losing perhaps the closest person she's ever had. The one who raised her—loved her as a tiny, little bag of skin whose only function was to cry and poop, then grow into a bigger thing

that cries and poops. That's parenthood. That's what mothers do! But of course, mothers are so much more than this. She was so much more than a caretaker. She evolved over time into that role, but what about before? What was my mother like as a child, as a sister, daughter, a teenager? God..that's a can of worms. My mom...as a teenager! Damn (shaking my head). See the thing is, I know EXACTLY what my mom was like as a teenager...and that's a problem. It's scary and gross and I don't like it. What kind of friend was my mom like? Who was she before she met my father, or when she met my father and didn't have children? What was she like with one kid, two kids, then me, her third child! How didn't my mother drown with three children? This is a serious inquiry! How did she do it? I want to know exactly how. Well, what about after? What about after she's been my mother? That's a weird question, right? You mean, like, after she dies? Possibly. Or maybe she's alive, and she's forgot she's my mother. Not of any fault of her own, I won't blame her, but what if you know, she just forgets. This happens. And according to my family history, this **will** happen. What would that be like? So this question of death bears a lot of weight, not only in a biological sense, between living and nonliving, but also in the sense of identity and meaning, between remembering and forgetting. It could be said that in each instance of forgetting one suffers a small death, another piece of one's self boxed with yellow tape and placed out of commission, so the question is no longer **if**, or **when**, my mother will die, but rather, how many times?

So, I started to write this story. My THESIS. And, I wrote it sober which was terrible. I don't recommend doing that....I began to imagine the death of my mother. And every day I sat to

write it was like I greeted her death at my door. I invited it in and I offered it a seat, and I talked with it. I had a seventy page conversation with the death of my mother. And I listened, and I shook my head and I cried. I cried a lot. So here it is, in honor of my mother and father. I thank you.

Reflecting on some of the conceptual elements of this project, I've come to realize that one of the most helpful ideas to keep my writing generative was the abandonment of a traditional narrative. With a background in poetry, or whatever I thought poetry to be over the timeline of my life, I leaned heavily toward the play of language in juxtapositional fragments and strange orientation. I relied on sound and cadence to carry me through a line and inform the next to produce a textured poem drunk on fricatives and stops. I had dabbled in prose, but never fully understood its potential and thought it to be too rigid for the type of works I enjoyed creating. That is until I met Renee Gladman. She asked me why. Why do sentences have to conform to tradition? What is so different between a block of prose and the formation of a poem? Is it visual? Is it semantic? The more questions she posed, the more stunned I became in my approach to answering them, because there are no intrinsic differences between the worlds of poetry and fiction. In fact, they are fundamentally made of the same materials. I began to realize the only difference between them is solely superficial, and the sooner the barrier between them falls the better.

I began writing sentences and they were simple. I found that most sentences came to me in this way, in simple terms, and that my function as a scribe was not to make the simple more complex, but rather to embrace their simplicities and extend them. I believe this is the beauty of the sentence. It takes a thought and brings it through a certain amount of distance, a chain of words, a web of meanings and identities. And I don't mean distance as withdrawal, but rather as duration. It seems the longer a thought is channeled through the sentence, the more room there is for connection. Take for example Woolf, Proust, or

Beckett. They dedicate themselves to writing out an idea all the way through, taking it as far as it will go, approaching it from all different angles and allowing the words to wander where they may. It's truly remarkable to read their work from a writer's perspective, knowing just how difficult it is to channel a line of thought for pages on end, acknowledging the amount of time they take to develop detail. I do not wish to write like these authors in particular, however I have deep admiration for the philosophies behind their style. I seek not to imitate them, but rather I seek what they sought.

It's only natural that I include in this poetics statement works of fiction that bore something within me, be it a hole or a seed, nevertheless *something* that stirred within and forced me to feel, and reexamine my craft. To understand why I write the way I write I believe it's paramount to observe the works, styles, and philosophies of the artists I have been engaging with. Below is a list of works that truly inspired the way I approach writing, fiction in particular.

Patrik Ourednik's *Europeana* manages to accomplish telling a type of story I have never come across. His use of history immediately attempts to inform and educate, but the arrangement and style of his prose leads us into a much deeper dimension than a mere history lesson or lecture, actually demanding us to think in terms of the hypothetical or the possible. He relies on a time period that is widely studied and discussed, or at least has been historically, and yet his account offers a much different approach than traditional formats, leading the reader through a sort of revolution, or circling of events, that overlap

and revisit, offering insights that are difficult to distinguish between subjective and objective. On the one hand, he remains emotionally detached from the events, and states them supremely as evidential. But, on the other, his tone suggests a certain outlook on the events themselves, and how they sound now in comparison to how they were understood then. It comes off as a sort of sardonic sarcasm, dark and revealing. To say the story relies wholly on our past knowledge of the events is a stretch I'm not so ready to make. The story doesn't assume anything, and tells of history (albeit selectively) as if someone were encountering it for the first time. History itself is a failure, because it attempts the impossible. For everything that is recorded, there are things uncontrollably and sometimes intentionally left unrecorded. But, this is not the concern of Ourednik. Again, I'm not sure it's very fruitful in pursuing his intentions, but his attentions are of much more interest. The story has moments of extreme particularity that open up little realms of possibility within a history that seems so concrete at times, we almost begin to think we already know what happened. But, Ourednik strikingly convinces us that we certainly don't know what actually happened, and that amidst the general and broadened belief of targeted atrocities, there are boundless instances of the horror that are inevitably untold, and unheard. The story explores the unstory. It rather revisits the history, the documents, the accessible data, and succeeds to confuse and blur those existing writings and teachings. By the end we come to understand that truth cannot be recorded, it can only have lived and died.

In the short story *The Expelled*, Beckett navigates the human memory through the story of an elderly man who ceases to surprise even himself when he really sits down to

think. The narration of the self as old and weathered leads to moments of reflection that not only inform through processes of the human memory, but also build the character into a knowable being. Because we're let in on little intricacies and tinctures of the character's life, (from present and past experiences) we're allowed as readers to combine these memories along with descriptive personality traits and physical characteristics to ultimately develop a certain feeling toward or about the character. In this way, the prose functions to get us to feel a certain way about the issues or persons at hand, be it the old man, the cabman, the horse, or the relationships between them. The writing also asks us to inquire about the validity of our own memories, and how our usage or reliability upon them continues to redefine our identity, which in turn affects our interactions with the world. Beckett digs into the human psyche, cycling through first, second, and third person, but as they relate to the self. He uses the 'I', 'you,' and 'he' throughout the piece to refer to his own situation. This creates a tri-chotomy of persona, but their division is actually what's working to bring them all together. The story seems to function as a way of thinking about how one gets into his/her present situation, and recollecting the steps it took to get to the here and now.

Anne Boyer's *Garments Against Women* also navigates the self, but in relation to the bigger picture of a capitalist society. Her arrangement of story, or stories, is interesting because there's very little mention of time. Granted there are tense shifts, but not direct appointment to a specific time, or in some instances, place. Rather than bringing the story to an external setting, a place we outwardly move, we're rather encouraged to navigate the

inside space of Boyer's thoughts and observations. Her stories set up the human condition, and the writing is used as a process for questioning, or opening up that condition, personally, socially, professionally, and authoritatively. The story dwells in an immediacy that is much different from 'once upon a time,' it's rather saying 'here, this time,' 'this is happening.' From the very beginning her writing leads us into a space of human contact, the sense that the interactions and relationships between people and whatever stimulus are creating the story. The direction the piece moves is far from linear, and I believe acts more like a web of inquires, or postulations, that tie into her own modes of thinking. While memory is surely at work, and always at work, I am grounded more in the presence of her working out into an idea, in a sort of pursuit, rather than reaching back (assuming memory is a 'reaching back'). The story seems to spiral and circulate around, rather than move straight on through, allowing different angles of approach to the central issues or ideas at hand. There's one moment in the piece where Boyer states that 'things change.' And, then her writing changes drastically into a stream of consciousness type of prose that employs extended metaphor and long silky sentences. It's an instance where the form and content are commenting and informing each other, showing that what Boyer is saying is actually taking shape on the page.

Virginia Woolf's excerpt from *The Waves* speaks to story and storytelling in the most grass roots, and core sort of way through simile and metaphor. Really, what is life, language, imagination, and experience without metaphor? The endless barrage of imagery overstimulates the senses, and creates a sort of numbing interaction between the words on

the page, the events taking place, and the modes of consciousness within the reader. A transport takes place to a specific setting, or area, and we stay there, in the same place throughout the piece. Though the descriptions are slightly changing, they are also constant. So the story is dealing with change and motion through a lens of constancy, choosing to discuss the same observations but through different metaphorical language, or applying the same metaphorical language to different observations. I think this technique is useful and frighteningly accurate if we think about our day to day lives, and the experiences we encounter with a cycling repetition. Everyday tasks take place, but each time they are slightly different. Much like how memory works. Each time we access a memory it has inevitably changed, if not in content, then certainly in context. So, the story takes us through a sort of revolving door, revisiting and re-experiencing, which really asks us to take notice, to spend the time in observation, and use time as a sort of lens for noting those changes. Really, it's time that allows this story to take shape, and the story uses it not only as a way of moving, but a way of seeing.

Bersenbrugge's *Farolita* tends to remain aloof and elliptical in terms of story, and storytelling, perhaps pursuing more fervently the emotional interpretation of experience and narrative. Characters are present, but their actions are not voluminous and explicit, but rather abstract and deal in oblique terms their consequences or responses. Often through color, an emotion or feeling propels the story, and opens up an access point to emotively dwell. It seems to me that Bersenbrugge isn't really concerned with telling us what or why things happen, but rather seems to be exploring the space around actions and occurrences,

shifting focus from the event itself to the bits surrounding it. Of course this idea is fought by the narrative of the story, but I would argue that the story functions not to bring us to a conclusion, but to pause and take up the scenery of thought and emotion. I'd say the story works through imagination and metaphor over logic and reason. It's difficult to put into words the emotional response to the text, but the arrangement of the story, the language of the writing itself is evocative of more than events, and narratives. These things happen, but are tinged with different lights, colors, and hues.

Longsoldier's **38** takes story into a quasi essay, prose, poem hybrid that really works to defy convention, or genre. The story functions to not only inform, but to arrange the sentences in such a way that leads us down an intended path. Her objectivity is a device of the story, but we're also aware that the author is shaping this piece to have a certain affect, with an 'a'. I'm interested in the intention of the writing, or perhaps it's more pertinent to consider the attention of the writing. The former was claimed by Longsoldier to really write a piece about grasses, but the latter was given to a completely different story. In terms of 'intention' we might not really get anywhere because who's to define and limit the purpose of a piece, but in terms of 'attention' we can find much more space to dig around and get our hands dirty. Longsoldier gives her attention to the language itself, constantly subverting its limitations, creating its own rules of operation, and responding to its own ideas. The story works to re-explain itself, cancel out any inconsistencies, and put into order a common ground for its own thoughts, a ground that can't be conquered or colonized by any outside force. For me, it's the striking clarity that brings me along, and the

willingness to put into simple terms the most offensive information. This writing holds my hand, but doesn't squeeze it. The story sits me down, but doesn't interrogate me. But, most importantly, the language is what is doing the work. It's the driving force. The language is leading Longsoldier, not the other way around.

The thing about prose is, or perhaps this is true of any art form, that the act is both tragic and comic. Tragic in the sense that each attempt to embody an experience or feeling in a sentence or phrase will ceaselessly fall short. Indeed, nothing can recapitulate experience except experience itself. All writing can do is hope to get close enough, and this is also what is comical about writing. No matter how beautiful our attempts we will always fail. We always come up short. And perhaps this is the beauty of writing in its essence. It is completely vulnerable and self-inflicting. Each failure is rather something to be cherished, and the gesture is beautiful *because* it fails, it is beautiful because it is broken and inadequate. It is beautiful because it perfectly represents the human condition.

I took to writing prose without knowing what I was doing or why I was doing it. I reached a point where I could hardly get anything to come out. I thought I was writing a story, but really I was writing my way *to* a story. The first hundred pages of this project brought me to the very first page of my thesis. I had no clue this was the way writing worked. I didn't know that somewhere along the way a new idea, or a new set of ideas would reveal themselves and suddenly take over the entire work. In a way, I wrote so I could start to

write. I was only able to do this after I spent time inside the lines of the writers I was reading at the time. I chose passages that spoke to me and I wrote them down word for word, and I read them aloud over and over. I stared at them until they stared back and I met the mind's eye, the mind of the creator writing through the idea. I took the sentences apart and analyzed their basic elements, then I put them back together and found a whole new meaning. I noticed things I enjoyed and asked myself why I enjoyed them, and put together a theory why. I noticed things I thought I could improve and made a note I could go back and refer to at the proper moment. I'd like to share these influential passages to show my process of observation and understanding. I consider these writers and their works to be the driving force behind my thesis.

Renee Gladman, *Calamities*

"I sat in front of it and felt distinctly without conflict that we were separate: I was a body and it was an object, albeit the most thin I'd ever seen and the most cavernous. I was a body and it was a page and we both had our proverbial blankness. I was poised to write. I was poised to open and write or to open and let writing happen. Since it had yet to be determined what writing actually was, how it formed, and where it went once it was made, you didn't know what you had to do in order to write. You seemed to want to make a map of that blank slate; you seemed to want to make a mark; you seemed to want to pull a mark out of the blankness. The page opened. It was clean but it crackled like something was living there. I wondered about the signs we were wearing—if somewhere on me was the sign "writer" and somewhere on it was "page," because somehow we knew what we were going to do. I was going to make a mark and it was going to pen and crackle and seem electrified: blank but full of presences or questions. My blankness was harder to define; when I looked for it—reached into myself for it—it was only the page that I found. But I didn't know whether at some point in my past, perhaps at the very first moment I set out to write, the page had fallen out of me or I had risen out of it."

I think what appeals to me most about Renee's writing is not necessarily where it takes me, but where it doesn't take me. I appreciate the amount of constraint she employs through extending out a sentence that doesn't feel constrained, but rather focused and direct. She isn't taking me somewhere I will never understand, or a place so predetermined nothing is left to discover. It's almost as if each line is asking a question of the one's surrounding it, and as she's writing, she's not the only controlling force, but in a way writing has become its own force being channeled. Something about her control over her craft, where she brings this intensity to a line or an idea that is so finely concentrated and involved, and which doesn't meander too far away from the center. She brings an idea to the page, and then offers multiple iterations of that idea forming a tightly woven web, the center of which connects to every outer and inner layer. Each word seems to be closely investigated, which is shown through her repetition of words to fully build sentences (structures) around the ideas being introduced. Here's a list of her repeating words: open, body, blank, poised, seemed, mark, somewhere, crackle, page. Renee uses each of these words in succession, often in the sentence right after it is first introduced, which offers a full examination of how she is using the word, and where the word is leading her.

For Renee, writing the idea is always the center of the idea. The act, the attempt, is not self-conscious of its simplicity, or vocabulary. The language isn't overbearing, and doesn't crowd the space. I can read at a comfortable pace, where I can forget that I'm reading, compared to more dense bodies of text that cause one to slow down, or trip up, and have to reread in order to smooth it out. Her words are already smoothed and come out of the

mouth with ease. She has an ability to breathe through her writing, to take her time in establishing an idea and bringing that idea to a new place through extension.

Renee extracts an extremely bountiful amount of writing in a single image. She needn't stack images on top of each other, but rather inhabits a single one, and is able to dwell there in a series of lines. She often brings words that have passed back to the surface, as a sort of resurrection, giving them new life, and a slightly different life than the one given before. Specifically, I'm looking at the lines "I was a body and it was an object..." and "I was a body and it was a page..." Through repetition, which here I prefer to call it 'resurrection,' because it truly is transformative, because she is writing in concentric circles with her sentences in similar shapes and shells, though instead of her circles growing larger and outward, (although theoretically I would argue they do this as well) they write inward, delving deeper inside the circle that came before it. And she doesn't do this by accident. This technique is methodical and practiced. In fact, she does it again in the next pair of lines, "I was poised to write. I was poised to open and write or to open and let writing happen." Again, we see Renee 'open' the sentence and peer inside, and write inside the space she had just created in the previous line. I guess you could call it layering, and it is, but instead of the layers stacking upon each other as one does with bricks, I would argue that the layers go inward, like peeling back an onion, on the account that her sentences seem to take me deeper, not higher. We don't get the sense that we're 'on top of it all' and we can see the topographical spaces from a withdrawn outlook. We get the sense, or at least I do, that we are taken within, steadily 'zooming in' which accounts for the space

looking larger and more porous. The space 'opens.' Also, the way this sentence feels in the mouth and flows from it is incredible. It's extremely rhythmical when spoken, and does this all on its own through the resurrected words coming back again to be vocalized.

The last point I'd like to make about this particular passage is the subtle shifting of perspective. The piece starts in the first person and builds within itself in this way for the first few lines. But, then she switches to the second person and continues in this vein for another few lines. Then, she fuses the first person with the third in the sentence that starts, "I wondered about the signs we were wearing..." and finishes, "somehow we knew what we were going to do." And by the end of the piece, she finishes back in the first person. And, all these rotations of perspective take us through these circles of relation and engagement. As readers, we are directly addressed through the second person, and from that moment we are on a journey with Renee embodying the space on the page, and reading as though it were us who is included and intimately involved with the work at hand. Renee is a writer's writer. By the last line, she taps into something so universal for the creative practice, it's as if she is speaking for all of us. And I'm more than okay with that.

Thomas Heise, *MOTH; or, how i came to be with you again*

"The grace of waking is the sleep that follows. The grace of waking is the sleep that follows. The grace of sleep is the wake that follows. The grace that follows. The phrase looped over and over as I lay awake and asleep the film reel of snowy mountains shuttled past my eyes in the dark feeling. Over and down. Whether early into the night or late toward morning, whether the day had already passed, had turned with a half-twist clockwise or counter like a mobius strip and begun anew to repeat itself I could not tell, nor would it have mattered, for time blurred and yet at that point in my life, during those incremental years which felt like a railroad being built at a snail's pace toward some unknown city, it seemed there was no progress, as if I were always floating between the

reality of my mattress and the play of light and shadow whether my eyes were opened or closed. I remember sensing one moment that if I craned my head out the frost-speckled window I might have seen the name of the last station in stencilled letters, perhaps an antique font, and an older man boarding at the last moment a train in the other direction. And if I waited a few more moments and rose up out of my berth, opened the window, and looked ahead might I have seen the name of the same station approaching through the drifts, then the echoing chamber of its Second Empire glassy morning and iron and the same man exiting the train in the other direction stare up at me with a look of recognition? And I remember thinking as I pulled the white sheet up over my eyes as I had as a child and then opened them, I would have seen the intermittent sun from the snow-covered firs and the dark columns of electricity poles spaced every half kilometre wash over the sheet and leave their mark on my eyes like a palimpsest after I closed them and saw myself with luggage in one hand and the other steadied on the shoulders of those seated as I walked backward down the aisle, feeling nauseated, as the train to Berlin shunted forward with its awful momentum against each step that brought me closer to the little cabin where I would slip into my bunk and pull the sheet up to my chin and lie there with my eyes open for how long I would not know because sleep would come, as it always did for me, with a rush of amnesia. I believe I have been subject throughout my life to bouts of fainting, sudden collapses in energy that have left me bereft and have found me waking after a spell of narcolepsy in an empty theatre, or on the shag carpeting in a rundown boarding house in Zurich, or on the way up the stairs or down, I forget, in a rented apartment, perhaps near Cologne where I know I once visited, resting for a second with my hand on the rail until a brief tap on the back and a *hello* by a stranger returned me for a while to this world and with it to the haunting awareness that I was unwell."

This passage from Thomas Heise I think makes for an interesting contrast to Renee because in many ways this work is doing the exact opposite of the former. One look at the block of text reveals the claustrophobic spacing of the language, and even skimming through one can't help but feel disoriented. And, on the topic of constraint, I believe it's evident from the formal presentation of the text, (which is precisely how it is presented in the book, although the vertical spacing might be slightly greater) that there isn't a great deal of constraint when it comes to Heise's building or layering of sentences. Without even reading the text, and from first glance, it suggests a very 'noisy' and what I later call 'torrential' employment of language, which I believe is an interesting and liberating frame to inhabit,

especially from the stance of creator/author. I also believe this makes for a polarizing gamut of craft, with Renee on one side and Thomas on the other.

Breaking into the text, the first two sentences set us up for a string of repeated phrases, so that by the third sentence we as readers have a certain expectation of where the writing is taking us. We're expecting to be hypnotized in a way, and willingly, as we continue to read, but Heise reverses the spin from clockwise to counter and all of the sudden the logic is ambidextrous. This creates a moment of pause, and almost a hard snap out of our expectations, causing us to think about this idea, instead of repetitively coaxing over them, as one would if the phrase were merely repeated three times in a row. He ends the line of thought not by spinning us back again in the other direction (clockwise) but instead, boils down the idea to its simplest theorem like Occam's Razor. He even addresses this spinning, or 'looping' in his next lines to suggest perhaps these aren't merely philosophical statements, but actual monologued experience. The narration takes us inside the looping as the character is experiencing it, and then we take off, "[o]ver and down" into a different indeterminate space altogether, dream-like and illusory.

Though this space isn't other-worldly in a way that is foreign and unrecognizable. Rather, Heise creates a mimetic dream in which the images that constitute the dream are of this world, and the woozy sense we get from following along is not based on the individual images themselves, in fact, they are quite clearly defined, but the pace at which they are being written and the language used to build this dream are contributing to this effect of

vortex-like, torrential narrative. His sentences are so long and linked that by the time you reach the end there is no suggestion of any beginning. (This is also how it's formed on the page, one block text with no indentation or separation of lines, so you're engulfed in the body of language, subsumed by image after image. Reading through, it's not hard to lose one's place, and if one does, getting back to where you left off isn't an easy task, one must sort through the foliage, often having to reread, to reexperience, which again contributes to the 'looping.')

The narrative itself is established, or at least it seems, solely through free association, one word leading to the next as they come with little to no censorship. And while the refinement of the language into beautiful hard-working sentences is apparent from how calculated the words add up, it feels as if Heise is on the rant of a lifetime and will not slow down. Which is how I would describe this text: fast. It seems to demand a certain speed of the reader because there is always something proceeding the prior, always something coming next, coming quickly, which hurls your attention forward to the final thing that will become of it. And, when it comes, we aren't so much disappointed as we are left wondering about everything it took to get there, because there was so much to explore and we only got a little taste.

The experience is like riding a train and looking out the window at the grasses and dirt immediately in view, and all you get is the rushing and blurring of objects flying by. Which is interesting considering the train and train station imagery Heise conjures, one can't help

but think it may be intentional to suggest his experience with the train is like our experience with the book, “I walked backward down the aisle, feeling nauseated, as the train to Berlin shunted forward with its awful momentum against each step...” The feeling is very similar.

Clarice Lispector, *The Apple in the Dark*

“Martim did not know what to do with his desire or how to apply it. From one thought to another—most of them were getting away from him—he reflected that even if he had failed in the creation of the future, he still had the past that was already created. With an intense desire he finally wanted to have something in his hand. And that seemed to him to be the easiest and least sensitive part of disillusion: the clay out of which it had already happened was at least a material from which one could begin. Then, with the same attitude of severe goodwill with which he had tried to create his plan of action for the future, he went back to his memory. ‘Oh, remember that trees exist and there are children and that bodies and tables exist,’ the man said to himself, trying to reach a maximum of objectivity.”

The last text I will examine brings together elements of both the first and second texts, and I believe situates itself between the two previous samples. Philosophically speaking, I believe this piece operates similarly to Renee in that the ideas being presented are actively being explored through the successive sentences, and the exploration takes place within one of the characters being led through the narrative, so in a way the layers and circles of thought can be said to travel deeper, not higher. However, there’s also a sense of internal dialogue that can similarly be found in Heise’s work, attempting to write/think out an idea that isn’t completely formed, and continues to reform as the writing continues to shape it. This also overlaps with Renee, though I would argue Renee offers more constraint than Heise, and perhaps Lispector is a middle-ground between the two. But, how I see this piece

separating from both previous texts is its relationship between the character and the narrator. There is a definite split between who has what knowledge, and that makes for a completely new progression of ideas, because there are two sets of layers being developed, one of the narrator as director and one of the character as player/receiver. We're seeing both sides of the story through two different sets of eyes, and this is what sets this piece apart from the first two. The first two are limited to one person's perspective, whereas this work seems to establish a gap between knowing-parties, and the discoveries made in that gap can be said to be our own (the readers). On the one side, the narrator is leading us through the narrative. On the other, the character (Martim) is experiencing that leading. And we are in between, straddling what is known and what is felt, without being fully immersed or blinded by one or the other.

Lispector's language is crafting a timeline of events through the ideas of feelings/desires that place us, along with Martim, in a state of reflection and contemplation. The first sentence establishes a sort of pause, there is an uneasiness of indecision surrounding the line that puts a halt to the narrative. "Martim did not know what to do..." For Lispector, this is a way to slow or suspend the movement of the piece (the plot) to establish options for Martim to think about. We know with a high degree of certainty that Martim will eventually 'do' something, but at this moment in the piece, the 'what' is not as important as the 'how,' what's under examination is not what Martim will do about his indecision, but rather how he will get there, what kinds of thinking must come first? Lispector is more interested in creating a space for the character to think about what will, or can be done, and in that space come deeper philosophical inquiries into environments within and without the novel. In a

way, we are experiencing Martim's thinking about desire and humanness, which is really Lispector's creation of Martim's thinking, which might be Lispector's own thinking, but we are also experiencing, or being told to experience these thoughts on our own. Lispector does this by keeping the beginning sentences broad/vague enough to cover a universal human characteristic, 'desire.' For our desires, as readers, and the subsequent fulfillment of those desires make us who we are and who we are not; that process is not solely specific to Martim and his desire, but covers all of human life. This idea would speak very differently if Lispector decided to add specificity to Martim's desires, "[He] did not know what to do with his desire to scream at Ermalinda for eating the last banana." This degree of specificity, or narrowness, blocks the reader from entering the thinking space because the situation is only immediate to Martim's desire to scream, however when Lispector leaves the sentence open, the invitation becomes broad enough to include the reader in thinking about the *idea* of desire, it's facets and structure, it's objectivity, rather than a specific, subjective kind of desire.

The scope of the narrative seems to pan out, way out, so Lispector is now no longer referring to the context and situations within the novel space, but something bigger is happening philosophically. She's using Martim as a lens to discover something about the human condition, desire, time, creation and existence. And, she gets to the end of it through memory, or rather Martim's memories, which seems to anchor us back into the novel and becomes interestingly paradoxical. In a way, she moves forward into the future, into the next word, sentence and paragraph, by reaching backward and transubstantiating the

memories of the past into the materials in which to build the future, through remembering she carries forward. This is a subtle, yet loud perspective on language itself, on story and how stories are told, their cyclical and recyclable nature. The materials of the past are the only ones we can use to build a future. We can only use the materials that were once given, and given all at once.

As much as I may like to talk about my own work I am resisting the urge to do so. The last thing I wish to do is to construct a definitive meaning around the sentences and paragraphs in my thesis. I believe it is up to the reader to extract what she/he will from the words on these pages. My only hope is to express a creative interpretation of my own experience of being through the english language, and to put that experience out into the world just as one who extends a hand to shake.

## ***Sourced Materials***

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\*Throughout the manuscript there are select lines from the list of works above. I make no claim to them and wish to identify their origin.