

Available Futures

Or:

*How to Mourn When You're Not Done Dying,
A Reflection*

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Abstract

Available Futures or: How To Mourn When
You're Not Done Dying, A Reflection

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The following pages describe works that I have made during the 15 months (and counting) of the COVID-19 pandemic. Twenty years from now, glib didactics describing “this time” will pepper the walls of museums for their surveys of “art practice in the time of plague” (or whatever) and I’m already rolling my eyes – rolling them to keep from crying. The true accounting of the pandemic has yet to be performed, but I – as a writer, as a student, as a teacher, as a feeler of feelings – offer these words to the record as a primary source. As a real-time recording. As a survey of my art practice in the time of plague. It’s a little creased and torn and crispy from the drying tears, but I think it will serve.

My experience of the pandemic has been a languid oscillation between fey hope and grief, with particular moments and days inflected with profound frustration or bewildered catatonia. The following document comprises an overview of the creative output which emanated from that sense of bewilderment.

In the first section, I will present two pieces of writing produced during the initial weeks and months of lockdown. The second section consists of an explanatory summary of a web based Machine Learning project, along with images and a brief text that was written for the piece. The final section contains a narrative retelling of the events leading up to, during, and after lockdown.

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Batman: 2020 and *BodyHorror* are short pieces of autobiographical fiction written during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The square footage of my world became identical to the square footage of my apartment. Access to art materials and places to make work became harder and harder to come by. And the result was extended periods of isolation, during which I had to draw from the well of my memory for material to generate any kind of creative work.

The resulting works recount specific incidents involving myself and my family, but interwoven with the factual elements of the texts are elements of hyperbole, references to popular culture, and absurd humor. The relationship between reader, author, and text are destabilized, leaving the texts open to many possible readings. While the texts are truthful, they are not the truth. They are fictionalized memoir. They are nonfiction, but filled with lies.

The text of *Batman: 2020* is reproduced in its entirety in the following pages. This work describes my relationship with my estranged cousin over the course of about 20 years. The first section is in the form of a play, with the majority of the action occurring in the stage direction. The second section contains a list of (possibly misheard or misremembered) information about my cousin that I received second-hand over a course of many years. The third and final section is a fictionalized narrative recounting of the funeral and wake of our common grandmother.

My cousin is called “Batman” throughout the narrative; this and the various gestures toward the extended lore of the comic book character Batman can be viewed as anachronisms or redactions to create distance between the writing and the true events upon which the writing is based. However, these references to a well known intellectual property complicate the characterization of the actors in my narrative and blur the boundary between memoir, parody, and fan-fiction.

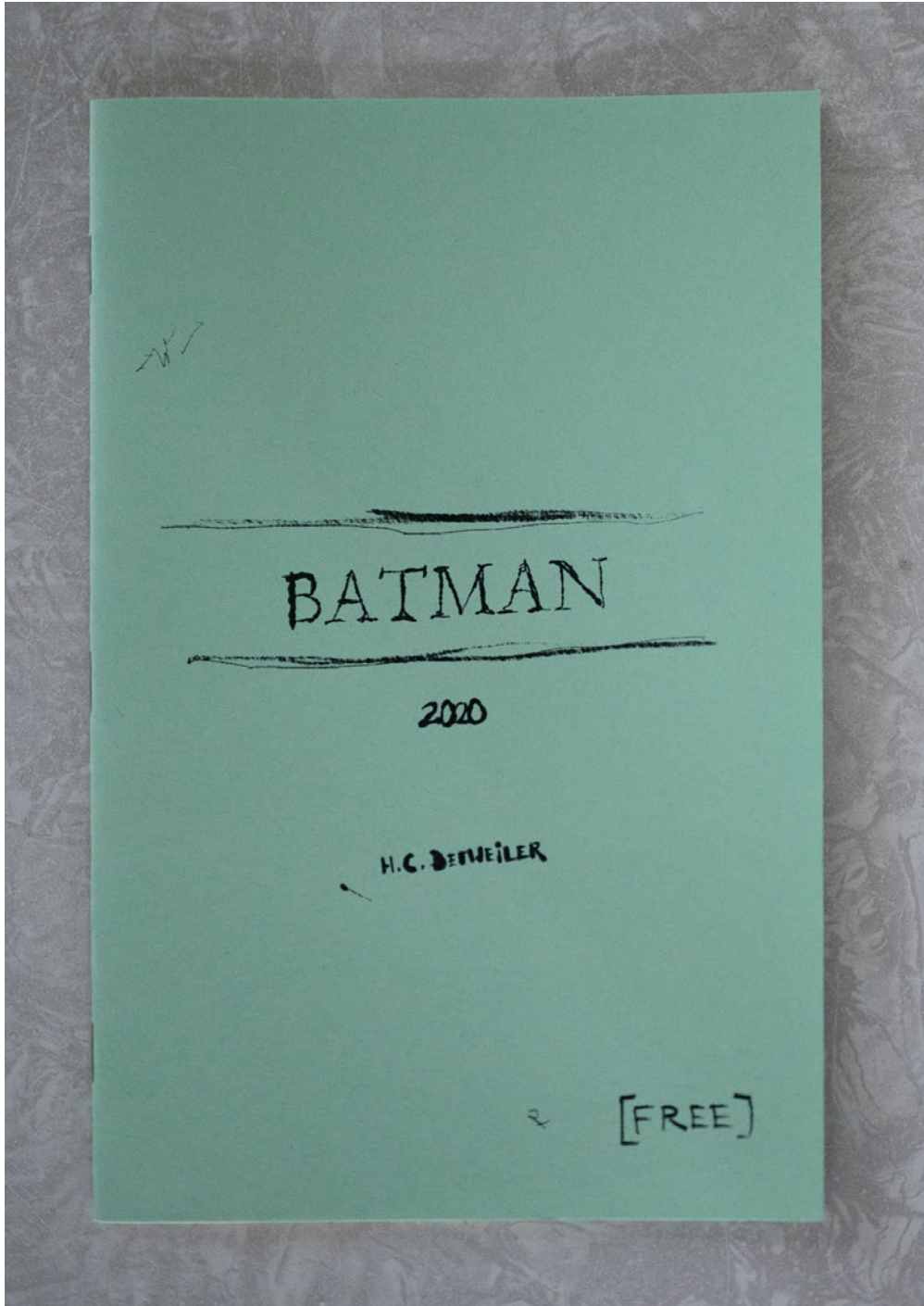


Figure 1: cover of the first print run of *Batman: 2020*. The first edition was prepared in an edition of 90 and made available for free during the exhibition *Notes on the Unseen* at the Jacob Lawrence Gallery from October 28 - November 14, 2020. Photo by Henry Detweiler.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

T'HIMs

BATMAN	<i>An asshole</i>
THOMAS WAYNE	<i>A sole proprietor</i>

T'HERs

MARTHA WAYNE	<i>Secret shopper and aerobics instructor</i>
MY MOTHER	<i>Elder sister to Thomas</i>
SELINA KYLE	<i>A bartender</i>

The CHORUS

[Elder Cousin to Batman, His Conscience, Myself]

1: The St Augustine Lawn

It is daytime in America. Evidence of north Florida's avian life is everywhere: some eggs, some nests, some nests with eggs! Absolutely tremendous seagulls skim the surface of the muddy Atlantic at top speed. Occasionally their wings will catch on a cresting wave, causing the animals to wipe out at high speed like a jetski in Kevin Costner's worst movie.

The sound of ocean waves can be faintly heard to the east over the dull hum of the A1A on this Sunday afternoon. The Waynes' cottage sits in a ditch at the confluence of the Guana River and the Intracoastal Waterway. Their seashore view to the east is occluded by a two lane highway and an ever expanding network of Spanish Colonial style mansions which return yearly to the sea, when called by that season's hurricanes.

The view to the west, off of their widow's walk, is of an (almost) uninterrupted expanse of salt marshes. A low shrubby canopy occasionally punctuated by a palm or a pine. Perfect, if you disregard the pulsing red ridge of cellular towers cleaving the middle distance.

Sea salt and sulfur hang suspended in the air and give your hair volume.

Thomas Wayne has built a small lawn in the back of the house out of fill dirt and gumption. Terra firma wrenched from the unyielding swamp. This small lawn of St Augustine grass is kept tidy and well watered. The grass's deep green is almost cerulean in direct sunlight. The centipedes and fungi that will eventually consume it are more than a decade in the future.

There is a prefab child's play structure at the northwest corner of the lawn. It consists of an elevated enclosed platform covered by a vinyl canopy, circus striped in Freddy Kreuger colors. The platform can be accessed by ascending a yellow enameled 5 rung ladder or the wide polished aluminum slide the kind that pops and dimples as it flexes in the summer heat. The kind of slide that takes pleasure in burning thigh backs and in children's tears.

Enter BATMAN and CHORUS both children wearing cowboy boots.

BATMAN [*singing*] Na na na na na na na na...
CHORUS Please stop.
BATMAN [*singing cont'd*] ...na na na na na na na na...
CHORUS Please.
BATMAN [*singing cont'd, louder*] ...na na na na na na na na...
CHORUS [*exhales, exasperated*]

CHORUS begins to inch toward the play structure, the St Augustine lawn squeaks as CHORUS advances.

BATMAN [*singing stops*] Hey! Where are you going?
CHORUS I was gonna go down the slide.
BATMAN That's my slide.
CHORUS My mom said it was okay.
BATMAN It's *my* slide.
CHORUS *And* I'm gonna go down *your* slide.
BATMAN Really? [*threateningly*]
CHORUS Um... yeah?
BATMAN No.
CHORUS But I'm bigger than you.

And it's true, CHORUS has at least 3 inches and 4 years on BATMAN. The twerp...

BATMAN But it's still my slide. [*he lunges*]

BATMAN begins to chase CHORUS around the play structure in wide circles, spiraling inwards. Eventually CHORUS makes it to the yellow enameled ladder and tightly clasps the middle rung. CHORUS recoils and winces in pain! The summer heat has been broiling the metal structure all morning. CHORUS feels the blisters beginning to bubble. BATMAN sees and stops.

BATMAN [*laughing, mocking*] Poor baby! Did that hurt or sumthin'?

CHORUS Um, duh!

BATMAN Aww.... [*mocking sympathy*] lemme kiss it better.

BATMAN lunges. CHORUS gasps and again grabs hold of the ladder and begins to climb. It feels like grabbing the surface of the sun. The imperative of escape necessitates this pain. Tears and sweat run off CHORUS' brow and fall to the St Augustine lawn below. The chartreuse grass deepens in hue as the sweat is absorbed down through the layers of turf and soil and gravel until it passes into the salt marsh beneath and becomes indistinguishable from all other water. The place where the sweat fell emanates a pale light, but CHORUS can't see that now.

The next rung, the next rung, the next rung. The searing pain in the hands, the slick bottoms of CHORUS' cowboy boots search for traction and then slip off of the enameled rungs climbing is difficult. Nevermind. Almost there!

But then the left boot slips. It makes contact with a hard surface. A surface that shouldn't be there. A surface in the air? There's no time to investigate! Almost there now! CHORUS' ears almost register the sound of BATMAN's fall being broken by bending grass as CHORUS summits the structure. The sweetness of escape! The satisfaction. The pain! But wounds can wait. In two strides, CHORUS is there. At the slide. This is it. CHORUS slides.

CHORUS [*half in joy/half in pain*] Weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee...

The pain in the scorched hands can only be topped by the throbbing heat that is building on the backs of CHORUS' bare thighs. Metal slides should be fucking illegal. I want blood. I want a pound of flesh. I want judicial retribution. I want my mom. It's only now that CHORUS notices that BATMAN is gone.

CHORUS Batman? [*looking around, but not too hard*]

After a moment or two, the pain in the legs and hand begins to recede. Maybe CHORUS was being a tad dramatic? It's been known to happen. BATMAN is still nowhere to be seen.

CHORUS Batman? [*shrugging*]

Now, in the full exuberance of youth, CHORUS circles back to the ladder and climbs and slides. And repeats: climbs and slides, climbs and slides, climbs and slides. CHORUS doesn't notice the indentation left in the St Augustine lawn where BATMAN fell. Nor does CHORUS hear BATMAN's soft crying from inside the house. The fresh blood that emerged from the wound on BATMAN's head spreads in a thin film on the chartreuse St Augustine lawn. The blades look wet and black in the sunlight.

From then on, BATMAN would always have a scar where CHORUS' boot heel made contact with his forehead. A faint half moon, scooping up and through and back down and out of his hairline. For years, he would almost forget it was there. Only as he aged would he begin to see it again. Every morning's rough towel drying pulling further millimeters of hair off of his head forever. The scar, unmistakable now. A thin white worm that refracts light differently from the rest of his scalp thank God for crows! BATMAN remembered the bootheel, forever.

Presently, CHORUS continues to run this dizzy circuit. Climbing. Sliding. Joy. Pain. Below, BATMAN's blood begins to slip down the surface of the grass and begins to pool in sticky spheres on the sandy topsoil. Suddenly, the surface tension breaks and BATMAN's blood begins to work its way down through the soil and the gravel and the marshland until it becomes indistinguishable from all other water.

2: Exercises for Greater Lung Capacity

I haven't seen Batman in years, but all the updates I get from my mother, his father's sister, paint a strangely coherent picture:

"Batman's been selling knives, door to door."

"Batman got caught with a pound of weed in his ~~Montero~~ Batmobile."

"Batman got his teeth punched out for screaming, 'if manatees didn't want to get chopped up, they should stay the hell away from my boat propeller!'"

"Batman got arrested for trying to shoplift all the Robitussin from the Publix."

"Batman is working on some rich guy's boat in Miami, spearfishing dolphins... or something."

"Batman can swim down 90 feet and back on a single breath."

All true and accurate according to the newspaper clippings our grandmother includes in her weekly letters. The copy paper they're written on gets thinner and thinner as her social security checks have to stretch farther.

That last one is impressive though the one about freediving.

90 feet down and back.

Damn.

I can barely swim and yet somehow I'm related *by blood* to Aquaman.

I mean, Batman.

Definitely Batman.

Thomas, gesticulating wildly, “see, *I thought that this was fuckin’ America!*”

“Jesus Christ. I’ll be right back.”

Martha left the Chorus standing there.

“Go on an’ sit down cuz,” Batman said, pushing out the empty stool next to him.

The Chorus sat. The stool was sticky. The bar was sticky. The polyurethaned surface was streaked with a leather hard film of sugar and bleach.

“Drink with me!”

“Absolutely not,” said the Chorus, raising a hand, but failing, to get the bartender’s attention, “some club soda with lime, please.”

“Little bitch.”

“Yeah. Exactly, Batman.”

Selina returned with Batman’s drink – a champagne coupe filled with a sickly gradient of grenadine, curaçao, and bourbon. A convex meniscus of pale yellow pineapple juice completed the rainbow – more like the colors of a bruise. There was a lit sparkler laying recumbent on the chipped rim of the glass.

“Hohohohoho, hell yeah! What d you call this one, sweetheart?”

“A Tallahassee Trail!”

“Oooooohhhhhh! That’s right you do!” Batman leaned back on his stool, snapping his fingers.

“Could I have a club soda with lime, please?”

“Sure,” Selina said, turning, “little bitch.”

Alone now, Batman and the Chorus sat in silence. Batman removed the burning sparkler from the drink with a black gloved hand. He inverted it and doused it in the liquid. The liquid in the coupe briefly ignited – dazzling – before it sizzled and went out. The smell of burning hair spread across the restaurant as Batman gulped his drink down in one. The people seated at the bar briefly erupted in cheers of approval before quickly returning to what they had come there to do, which is to say: watch bubbles of carbonation collect on the deeply etched interior surfaces of their pints of Bud Light Lime.

Without looking, Selina slammed a heavy glass of carbonated water down in front of the Chorus, spilling a third of the contents. A listless yellowing lime clung to the rim for dear life.

“Another one, sugar?” Selina said, facing Batman.

“Oooooohhhhhh! You know it *bay bee!*” said Batman, snapping.

The puddle of spilled soda water reactivated the film on the surface of the bar, which began to sizzle and pop and smelled like sulfur. The Chorus watched, distracted for a moment.

“So what’s your deal, cuz?” Batman lowered his voice, “you some kind of faggot or somethin’?”

“Umm... sure, Batman.”

“Hey, that’s cool man! As long as you don’t try to kiss me or nothin’! Haha.”

“Sounds like a plan, Batman.”

Quiet, again.

“Did you know, like a month before she went into the hospital for good, Nana crashed her Cadillac through the garage at dad’s house.”

“What?”

“Yeah, I guess she got confused and had been driving back and forth on A1A for, like, *hours!* She was trying to find her and Pop pop’s old house. And, you know, that old place ain’t even *existed* for like *12 years!*”

It was true, the house at 123 Mills Lane had been razed and the acre it had stood on was divided into thirds. The property had been sold shortly after the release of the first of the charlatan Christopher Nolan’s

After the dinner and when goodbyes had been said, Batman, now drunk, returned to the bar. The Chorus joined reluctantly. There was nothing better to do.

“Fuck! It’s good to see you cuz! You were always my favorite cousin, man. After dad was a dick and you and your mom stopped calling, I got stuck down here with these goody two shoes ass Mennonites for cousins... Man! Fuck! Did you ever hear about the time that they made us bring the *turkey* to Thanksgiving? The fuckin’ *turkey*, my dude! Who even does that? Like, really! Who does that? A casserole and some sweet potatoes or something, sure. But the *Goddamn turkey???*”

“And get this: after the meal, we’re cleaning up and they have us walk all the trash and leftovers and stuff to this big pit out behind their house, like, where they burn all their garbage or whatever. And *guess* what was on top of the trash pile?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“*Guess!!!*”

“I really don’t know, Batman. A... a swordfish.”

“A swordfish? *No you fuckin’ asshole!* A swordfish? Where the hell would they even *get* a swordfish?”

“I don’t know, they all seemed to like it tonight...”

“They don’t like swordfish, man! Nobody fuckin’ likes swordfish! They just ordered it because it was on sale! And God fuckin’ knows that they could afford better! Nana just left them *all* the silver... damn! A swordfish? The shit?”

Batman was shouting. His face was red and a vein bulged in the center of his forehead. The horseshoe shaped scar that the Chorus’ boot had made all those years ago was now a full inch below Batman’s hairline. It glowed bright white against his face, which was now somewhere between plum and puce.

“Shit. I don’t know then, Batman. What was it? What was in the trash pit?”

“It was a *turkey!* A fuckin’ carcass of a fuckin’ turkey! Those assholes cooked a *turkey* for *themselves* the night before. And *then* asked us to bring one to the ‘family’ Thanksgiving. ‘Family’ my ass! Can you even believe that? Haha!”

The Chorus stared.

* * *

Batman and the Chorus closed the bar that night, because of course they did. They and Selina walked out of the bar toward Batman’s parked ~~truck~~ Batmobile. Fast food wrappers spilled out onto the asphalt when Selina opened the passenger door.

“Hey, look man,” said Batman, turning to the Chorus, “I got a lot of shit in my ~~truck~~ Batmobile right now, man, and I don’t think I can fit you both.”

“That’s fine,” said the Chorus, “I can call a ride.”

“*Damn!* It was good to see you, cuz. *Fuckin’* good. Don’t let it be another 10 years, okay?”

“Okay, Batman.”

“I love you, man.”

“Okay, Batman.”

Batman, with Selina, drove off, swerving in the sodium lit Florida twilight. The outline of long blue clouds now visible in the approaching Sunday dawn. Right now, the Chorus needed to get back to the Holiday Inn the one directly next to the retirement community where their Nana had spent her last years.

The cab couldn’t’ve come quickly enough.

BodyHorror contains multiple narratives that deal with living-while-dying in different forms. The main narrative describes a vacation that I took with my mother to a cave in central Kentucky when I was a child and my subsequent experience of living with her as she underwent aggressive medical treatments for cancer. This narrative is intercut with chapters that stray from the story, but they continue to build on themes established in the main narrative. Topics of these interstitial chapters include a recounting of a famous cave explorer's (famous) death, a meditation on a particular clip of archival footage of musician Stevie Nicks, and a chapter that takes place within David Cronenberg's 1986 film *The Fly*.

The text of *BodyHorror* is excerpted in the following pages. The full text has not been reproduced here, but ways in which these chapters interact with one another is broadly typical of the whole text.

1986: Brundlefly

He pulled off parts of himself and kept them in the medicine cabinet.

“Is this what happens when people die?”

Toenails. Fingernails. Ears – first parts, then the rest. Each biological specimen ordered and dated in glass petri dishes or medicine bottles – dated to the minute that he permanently separated them from his organism.

It all smelled sour: the cabinet, the bathroom, the hallway, the high ceilinged room that served as bedroom, living room, and laboratory. The only sterile smell came from the two black teleportation pods against the western wall. They smelled like electrical fire and lemon-scented Lysol – humming, static.

“Is this what happens when people die?”

Nowadays, he takes his meals in the open kitchen – the sink piled high with unwashed dishes that would never be cleaned. In a few weeks, these would be removed in thirty six-gallon black plastic bags by a disappointed salvage crew – disappointed that there was nothing to salvage. For now though, the reality of his transforming body was too fascinating to distract him from things that hadn’t happened yet.

He was changing in so many ways.

For instance: he no longer ate from plates – they were all dirty anyway. Instead, he made little mounds. Cairns of sugary breakfast cereal poured in alphabetical order directly onto the quartz countertop:

Cap’n Crunch
Cinnamon Toast Crunch
Coco Puffs
Frosted Flakes
Fruit Loops
Lucky Charms
Trix

Perfect little mountains. Each distinct and unmistakable as itself. But these little hills frayed at the bottom. Fractured particles of brightly colored grain and sugar-dust blended together in a simmering film across the countertop.

What is this purple fragment of obscure provenance?

Is it a *Tric* or a *Fruit Loop*?

Let me hold it up to the light

At mealtimes, sweet tears would run freely down his face as he chewed. Sugar made his teeth hurt. The raw insides of his mouth burned and were torn easily. Bright nerve pain radiated out and up from the center of his mandible electric.

"Is this what happens when people die?"

On the windowsill above the overflowing sink, another pile was forming.

Drawn by the sugar dusting every surface, young flies came to eat their fill. Sometimes, dizzy on the sweetness, the insects would fly headlong into the transparent surface of the window and make little smudges on impact. Then, they'd topple down, and land on the growing pile of bodies recumbent, forever.

But now, an old fly lands on the vertical glass of the windowpane. This fly is tired and he deserves a break. It has been thirty six hours since his birth and he knows that he's living on borrowed time.

This Moses of flies.

This Abraham of insects.

He's older now than his father ever was. Or his father's father, or his father's father's father

Now the drying sinews of his feet release from the glass six legs and none that stick anymore.

He falls down and hits hard. He is the latest on the pile of little dried insect bodies that have noiselessly accreted in the bottom right corner of this windowsill. He slides a little, coming to rest on his back about a third of the way down the hill of bodies a communal grave. His wings were crushed in the fall and they sting in the broken places. But the sunshine that's pouring through the window feels warm and nice on his thorax.

Warm, sweet sunshine.

Every moment until now has been seen through the kaleidoscopic array of nested he agonal structures that constitute his vision. But now the he agons on the periphery start to flicker off like television sets humming, static.

First one, then two, then three. More and more, spiraling inwards.

His mind recedes from the body (his body).

And he is safe.

He is just a witness now. Sole audience to these flickering lights. An electric pop and hiss is almost audible as the he agons go dark.

And he is safe.

He can faintly perceive a buzzing. Is it his voice? Is it the fading man shaped thing casting a long shadow from the end of the hallway? Is he screaming? Or is the sound coming from the fly that has just fallen next to him? The fly who's legs still twitched. The fly with a man's face.

The last he agon goes out and there are no more questions. Only the sweet warmth of the sun. And soon, not even that.

And still, he is safe.

1995: Home Box Office

The sign read *Free HBO* and this fact made their present choice between the Spelunker's Inn and the Motel 6 an easy one. Cave City, Kentucky was light on evening entertainment, so a movie without commercial interruption seemed just the thing after a long day of driving. Sure, it would've been nice to support a local business, but the familiarity offered by a chain motel comforted the woman, especially at this time of night. A simple room, two beds, hot water, and Home Box Office – *gratis*.

The boy, her son, had been asleep for most of the drive – he always fell asleep on long car rides. She pulled into the Motel 6, parked the car, checked in, and then re-parked in a vacant space nearest their room – room number 6.

The pickup truck to her left had nearly double-parked, which frustrated her maybe more than it should. She gingerly opened her door, just wide enough to give her the space to slide out without letting her car door make contact with the truck.

The owner of the pickup watched as she did – sitting outside next to the halfway opened door to room 4. The floral-patterned chair where he sat had been pulled from inside the room and a Camel cigarette smouldered between the yellowing second knuckles of his left index and middle fingers.

The car door pressed into her chest as she slid out. There was an unexpected pain in her right breast as it passed over the inside surface of the car door. But it passed just as quickly. She walked around the back of the car and briefly made eye contact with the truck's seated owner as he took a deep drag off his cigarette. She nodded awkwardly in his direction as her eyes darted around desperately searching for something else to look at.

She opened the passenger door and gently pressed on her sleeping son's right shoulder. He roused and blinked several times to help focus the world.

"We're here?" he asked.

"Sure are," she replied, "we got room 6, like how old you are."

He unbuckled himself and followed his mother to their room. He too made brief awkward eye contact with the smoking man outside of room 4. Runs in the family...

The room was simple, appeared to be clean, and only smelled faintly of stale cigarettes. A smell that was quickly subsumed by the smell of fresh Freon when she turned on the wall mounted air conditioning unit.

"It's nice, Mom."

"It'll do. And it's real close to the entrance to the park, so we won't have to do too much driving tomorrow."

"That's good."

The next day, they would get up late and drive the 10 minutes to the entrance of Mammoth Cave National Park, where they would stop for a photo. She would set the autotimer and place the camera on the hood of the car, pointing toward her son who was already standing by the base of the entrance sign.

Welcome to Mammoth Cave National Park. Established 1941.

She would run to meet her son and they would smile together, just as the flash fired. It wouldn't be until a month later that they realized that the angle at which the camera had rested on the car hood had cropped her at about mid chest and bisected his head just below the nose. Only wisps of his longish brown hair were visible on either side of his forced gap toothed smile.

Maybe they should've asked someone to hold the camera.

1995: Home Box Office, Again

The TV was dark. The black box sat on a low brown dresser at the foot of the beds and reflected the room, darkly, in the parabolic surface of its screen. Two beds, a telephone, a lit sconce above the sink that was just outside of the bathroom, two figures. The woman's reflection became more distinct as she approached and pressed the *power* button.

Static electricity crackled the air. The light hair on her forearms stood erect and leaned toward the screen as Wolf Blitzer finished saying something about the bombing last month in Oklahoma City.

She pressed the *channel up* button with her left index finger as she pulled open the top drawer of the dresser with her other hand. There is a Holy Bible – placed there by the Gideons – and a remote control – probably placed there by the housekeeper. She picks up the remote and closes the drawer. She does not disturb the Bible.

"Do you want to watch a movie or something?" she asked.

"Okay," said the boy.

"They've got HBO, maybe there's something good on there."

"Okay Mom," he said, closing his book and sliding away on the bed where he sat.

She walked away from the TV. She was now pressing the *channel up* button on the remote. The green numbers increased steadily in the upper righthand corner of the screen. Flashes of sitcoms appeared and dissolved again into static before being reconstituted into cartoons, newsrooms, or the pixelated faces of people being forced into police cars.

A plastic embossed label which read *HBO-channel 42* had been adhered to the remote control. She pressed and pressed the button until the green numbers matched.

The face of that actor – you know, that one guy from *Jurassic Park* – appeared on the screen. Then that lady – the one from *Beetlejuice* and that other movie about baseball that has Madonna in it. And they're talking. They both have really, *really* fluffy hair. Then they're in a car. Now they're in an open room with high ceilings and two black egg-shaped structures. She's calling them *phone booths*, and he's calling them *telepods*.

The woman had seen this movie before. Years before. She remembered that it was a scary movie, but not much more.

"This is a scary movie, I think," she said.

"Okay," said the boy.

"Do you think you still want to watch it?"

"Yeah, I really like this actress lady."

"Okay, but just let me know if it gets too scary. Okay?"

Surely, she thought, they'll edit out anything that's too scary. It's on television after all. There aren't commercials, but it's still television.

On the TV, *Jurassic Park* teleports *Beetlejuice's* stocking across the room.

1995: In the Medicine Cabinet

The boy didn't sleep much that night.

Everytime he closed his eyes, he saw another set of eyes. Green eyes. Insect eyes.

He stood and went to the sink for some water. There was no medicine cabinet. But if there had been, he imagined it would be full of body parts – like in the movie from earlier.

The woman had gone to sleep thinking that it had been a mistake letting her son watch that film.

So much blood and guts and screaming...

She stirred several times during the night and looked over to her son. Sometimes he would seem to be sleeping. Sometimes his wide eyes would be darting across the ceiling. Mapping the topography? Or looking for flies?

She knew that she had made a mistake.

2005: La-Z-Boy

The cancer had been mostly removed.

There was scarring near the armpits where some, mercifully benign, lymph nodes had been removed. The laparoscopic scars were hardly noticeable – at least not when juxtaposed with her chest. The surgeons had removed a large piece of her left breast and her right breast was almost entirely gone. Shiny pink tracks of fresh scar tissue criss crossed her chest like lines on a map.

A portacath had been implanted in between her skin and her ribcage. The device connected directly into a large vein in her chest and would ease the coming infusions of chemotherapy drugs.

Chemo worked like this: the woman would leave work early on Friday and drive 20 minutes north to the hospital. When she got there, she would sit in a La-Z-Boy – in a row of La-Z-Boys – and a nurse would come and insert a needle that was connected to an IV bag into the woman's chest. For the next hour or so, drugs would move from the bag directly into the woman's bloodstream. The drugs would kill the rest of the cancer, but there would be consequences.

2005: Body Horror

The medicine worked, but took its toll. The nausea always kept her awake and sweating for the first night after a treatment.

A few weeks in, her hair began to fall out – first in strands then in patches – around the crown of her head. She decided to let her usual hairdresser buzz it all off rather than waiting. They both cried.

A few more weeks on and the nails on her fingers and toes began growing-in thick and yellow. She bruised more easily now and the bags under her eyes went from purple to puce.

When they inserted the needle into her chest, it felt warm. During a treatment, when she exhaled through her mouth, she could taste the acrid flavor of the medicine on her breath which felt hot and it made her feel like a dragon.

Her health insurance covered the cost of a blonde hard-front wig that looked somewhat like her natural hair, but she usually favored a pale blue terry cloth turban – it was just more comfortable and the wig agitated her scalp.

Her nails began splitting and it hurt to wear shoes or walk or hold things too tight. The boy, 16 now, was afraid to look at her. She could tell by the way his eyes darted around when they were together – searching for anything else to look at.

The boy, a devotee of horror films, could not look at the real-life horror in front of him. It hurt too much to look. He was afraid of how much it hurt. Afraid not to be strong. So he stayed quiet and let his eyes fall on anything else in the room.

The nails cracked through to the quick and separated from her fingers and toes. She started wearing white cotton gloves around the house – little patches of moisture darkening the fabric around the fingertips.

Just in case, the woman had decided to pick out some music to be played at her funeral:

Suzanne Vega – Luka

Natalie Merchant – Kind and Generous

R.E.M. – Try Not To Breathe

Edie Brickell & New Bohemians – Circle

Stevie Nicks – Wild Heart

Until The Sky Falls Down on Me is a computationally generated video piece with accompanying text. Using artist Bas Jan Ader's 1971 film *I'm Too Sad To Tell You* as the starting point, I used a Machine Learning program to generate a video "deepfake", in which my likeness replaces Jan Ader in the original film. The film and several variations on the final film, are posted on my personal website with interstitial texts that explore the space between performed and earnestly felt grieving. The work is less about inserting my likeness into an art historical archive – although it is that objectively – and more about the experience of recognition and a desire for a cleansing-through-grief that is, for whatever reason, unattainable. The text interstitials from the web version of the work are reproduced in an adapted form on the following page.

1971:

Somewhere in southern California, Dutch expat and artist, Bas Jan Ader cries [on camera]. This document of [performed] pain will enter the archive as a recording on consumer-grade celluloid.

1975:

Bas Jan Ader disappears without a trace while attempting to sail a 13-foot boat across the North Atlantic, solo. He is last seen rounding the horizon sometime on July 9, 1975.

2020:

It's winter in Seattle.
The rain and the virus keep me inside.
I feel as though I barely move anymore.
I barely feel as though I feel.

I watch *I'm Too Sad To Tell You* over and over and over, impassive.
The contours of the Dutchman's [performed] grieving fascinate me.
I've been here watching for so long that my laptop knows my face.

Imagine what it would be like cry like that.

To sob.
To weep.
To bawl.
To keen.

And after... to feel productively emptied.

Two networks work to shape my mask to his grieving.
Every iteration makes the grotesque twisting of my face more...
plausible.

With every iteration, my catharsis becomes more convincing.
Even as he becomes more redundant.

What would it feel like to fill the ocean with tears,
only to be swallowed by it?
Did his eyes burn from his salt as he performed for the camera ■ back
in 1971?
Did they burn again [and for the last time] in '75?
Lachrymation, then oblivion.



Figure 2: Stills from *Until The Sky Falls Down On Me*, 2020. <http://henrydetweiler.com/untiltheskyfallsdownonme> Photos by Henry Detweiler.

CODA

Let me tell you about the last thing I did before lockdown. As the pandemic was beginning to crash like a great wave upon the shore (from sea to shining sea), I stood in the center of a circle of 36 twenty-somethings – all of them unmasked with touching elbows (we didn’t know better yet!) – and told them that they didn’t have jobs anymore. COVID-19 – or “covid” as my employer insisted we all refer to it in written communication – came early and hard for small businesses and restaurants across the country. The smallish Seattle-based coffee company I worked for was no exception. Sales had tanked and we knew a shelter-in-place order was likely, so we closed all the cafes and “temporarily” laid off all of the front-of-house staff to stem the hemorrhaging capital.

The murmurings that this might be bad in the US began in earnest sometime in January 2020, if memory serves. Over the weeks that followed I, and pretty much everyone I knew, watched with growing horror as images of streets populated only by masked “essential workers”, besuited in off the rack Tyvek, began rolling in. First from Wuhan, then Florence, then New York, then Kirkland – a small municipality in Washington state, separated only by about ten miles (and a lake) from me and my studio apartment on the western slope of Seattle’s Capitol Hill.

In the week leading up to this mass-firing event, I had attended several hastily coordinated meals with friends and acquaintances in the International District. The neighborhood sits immediately south of Downtown and is so-called because it contains the city’s Chinatown, Japantown, Little Saigon, and has a density of locally owned small businesses and family run restaurants that is unlike anywhere else in the city. Businesses in the ID were some of the first to be financially impacted (Luna 2020) as a nascent fear – heavily inflected with racism – began to take hold of the city. Remember, this was well in advance of any mask mandates and shelter-in-place orders, so as far as I knew at that moment, while this was a serious disease, it probably wasn’t serious enough *here* or *yet* to keep me from going out to dinner with friends for the third or fourth time that week. If this coronavirus was going to be a serious issue in Seattle, surely there would be some clarion guidance from public health officials. Surely that would be coming. Surely...

Exactly 13 days before the mass-firing event, I had returned to Seattle on a redeye flight after a 10-day tour of coffee farms in Huehuetenango, a mountainous region in the western highlands of Guatemala. Six of the soon-to-be-unemployed twenty-somethings had accompanied me on the trip and together we rode for hours on narrow dirt roads in the beds of pickup trucks. We switchbacked deep into the mountains, climbing ever higher, flanked by sheer cliffs on either side. Immeasurably up on one side. Dizzily down to the valleys below on the other. Everything covered in growing coffee.

There was a day midway through our time in Guatemala when almost everyone was sick. Mercifully, I had been sick two days before and had mostly recovered when the others went down. As a result, I was able to flit from bedside to bedside, administering little glass bottles of this cloyingly sweet coconut-flavored electrolyte drink, like some sunburnt Florence Nightingale. I like to be helpful.

Our translator and guide was named Hugo – not his real name. He and I passed the time chatting while the others tried to sleep between their frequent sessions of gastrointestinal evacuation. We had been talking about the news and American politics and at some point Hugo asked me, “what do you think about this COVID thing?”

I said, “it seems like it’s not really gonna be much of a problem in the States. I mean, if you don’t have a compromised immune system, you’ll probably be fine.”

“I guess these guys are screwed,” he said looking at the moaning infirm around us.

We both laughed, sardonically.



Figure 3: coffee cherries growing at *Finca Rosma* in Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo by Henry Detweiler

I had been cleaning a toilet when I got the call.

One of the new baristas had flaked and didn't show up for their shift, so the responsibility fell to me, as the coffee company's *Team Development Lead*, to fill in at the last minute. The cafe was situated on the main retail drag of one of those suburban-feeling Seattle neighborhoods. The ones that are composed mostly of modest single family homes who's aging middle class inhabitants had accidentally become millionaires when housing prices began exploding in the early 2010s (Figure 2). The company operated several cafes around Seattle and this was by far the busiest – outpaced in revenue only by the Downtown location when the reliable summer traffic of tourists would swell that shop to bursting. There was a lull in the interminable queue, so I volunteered to clean the toilets and disappear for a while.

I don't really mind cleaning toilets. Or making coffee for that matter. In fact, the job was basically the best that I have ever had. For the first time in my life I had an employer who seemed to respect me, value my input, and (importantly) paid for medical/dental, gave me a subsidized transit pass, plus 2 weeks paid vacation. The salary was modest by Seattle standards, but it allowed me to pay all of my bills and put a couple hundred bucks away in a savings account each month, so it was enough. There hadn't been enough three years before when I was making sub-minimum wage, living off day-old pastries, and using EBT for groceries in Chicago. There definitely hadn't been enough two years before that, when I had been hired as the *Interim Director* for a small arts nonprofit in Kentucky and somehow got stuck paying almost all of my meager paychecks to a board member who had agreed to "let me stay" in their condo (with black mold in the walls) while I "got settled". Kentucky had established a healthcare marketplace under the Affordable Care Act, but I wasn't making enough after paying for rent to pay for groceries *and* insurance, but (on paper) I was making too much to qualify for Medicaid. So I did without healthcare that summer. But booze and cigarettes are cheap in that state and can be a serviceable alternative to antidepressants when you can't afford a doctor. At least they can be for a while.

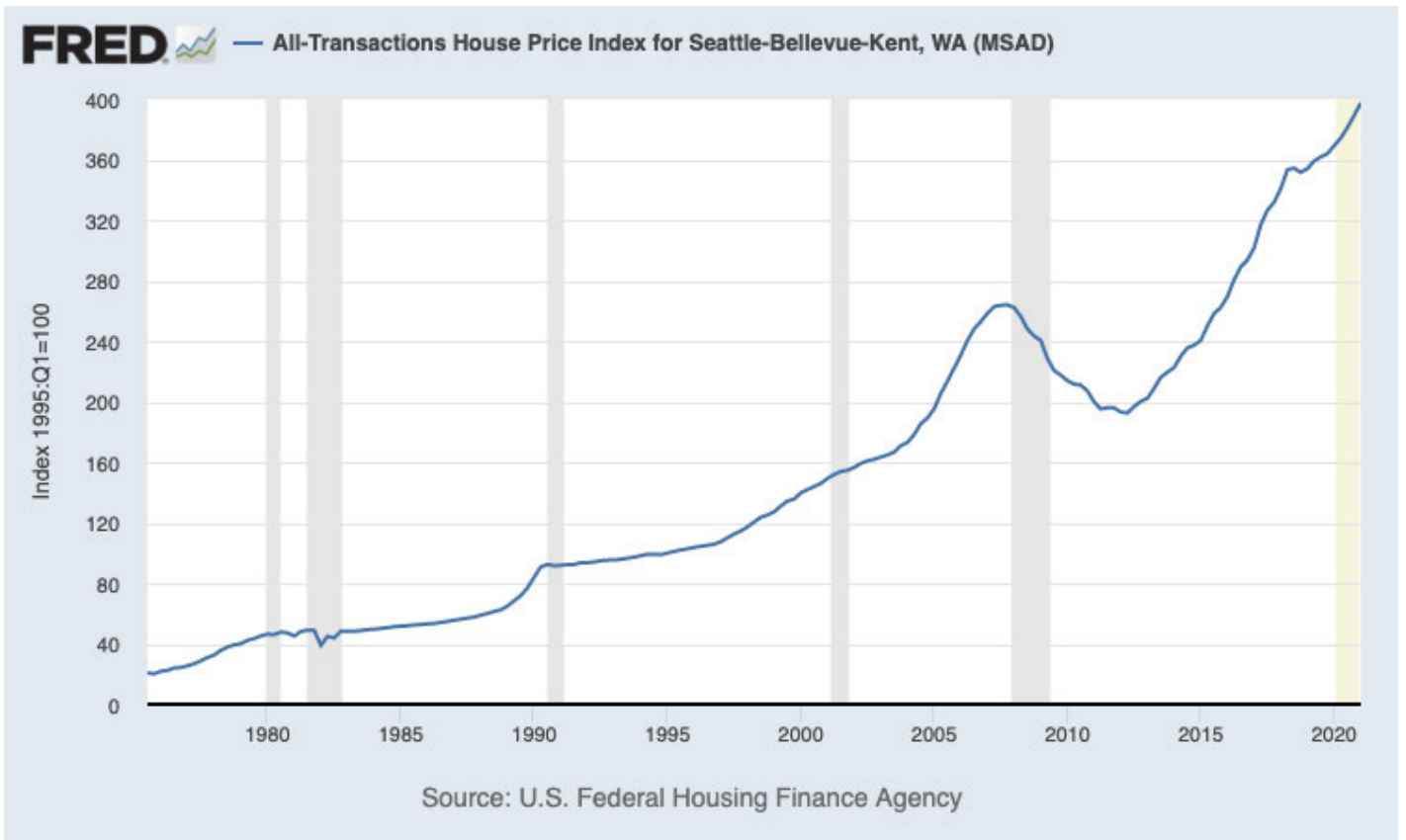


Figure 4: graph showing the increase of housing prices in Seattle from 1975-2021. A noticeable (ongoing) increase can be seen starting in the early 2010s. (FRED 2021)

So I was sitting (pretty) pretty cleaning that toilet in late summer of 2019. I didn't particularly like making coffee, but I also didn't mind it too much. And when I wasn't filling in at the cafes, I was basically working a normal office job and it wasn't too mentally taxing. I learned to speak in the company jargon in meetings and would offer insights on "workplace happiness" and "the employee condition" – which were basically just half-remembered platitudes that I ham-handedly cribbed from those glorious 8 months in Atlanta back in 2015 when I was able to afford both antidepressants *and* a regular appointment with a therapist.

But then I got the call: I had been accepted to the UW Photo/Media program *after all* and classes were starting next week.

I had already gotten over the sting of disappointment of not being accepted to the program – it wasn't the first time I'd been rejected from grad schools. All seven of the years that had elapsed since undergrad were marked with nearly universal rejections from graduate programs, RFPs, residencies, etc., so this latest one wasn't that surprising. I had slapped together the application materials in the days leading up to the deadline. I had frantically called old colleagues and professors to write letters of recommendation and dug through hundreds of gigabytes of badly labeled images to find ones which might be convincing enough to make it appear as though I was an artist – a description I barely felt still accurate for pointing to what "I am".

Getting asked to interview had certainly been a surprise. We had started on a faulty Skype connection, so we improvised and moved to a phone call. I felt like I had made a fool out of myself afterwards, which is usually how I feel when I interview for anything. But it was still nice to get asked all the same.

Given the circumstances, I wasn't surprised by the rejection email. It had landed in my inbox just a few days before my 30th birthday and I opened it at work. At that time, I was working as the manager of a different cafe which had just been sold to new owners. They were a middle aged couple, neither of whom had any previous experience (or interest) in the service industry. But their self-confidence (buoyed by the millions that they had made in tech) combined with their general love of DIY television had them convinced that they would succeed at coffeeshop-ing – or at least that it wouldn't matter much to their personal bottom line if they failed. They announced their intention to keep everyone on staff and kindly asked me, as the manager, to stay on with more responsibility – they didn't know the first thing about coffee after all – but with a \$15k cut to my salary.

So when the rejection letter finally came it, it hardly registered. There were more pressing matters to attend to. I'd focus on feeling like an art failure after I knew where the payments for next month's rent (\$1300/mo), health insurance (\$400/mo), and student loans (\$300/mo) would be coming from. Not to mention the payments for that pesky \$8.5k predatory personal loan I had used to refinance the (even more predatory) credit card debt that I had somehow accumulated over years of working low wage jobs while trying to make a career as an artist.

Thankfully, it didn't take too long to find a job this time.

About two weeks after my 30th birthday, I was hired by the coffee company that I was working for when I got the call from UW. It wasn't the most exciting job and it certainly wasn't in my *field*, if indeed art was my *field*. I may have had to clean toilets and serve coffee sometimes, but they were gonna send me to Guatemala with a group of team members the next spring to learn about coffee cultivation and production, and that was exciting.

The company had been sending small groups of employees to Guatemala for the past 4 or 5 picking seasons to get a first hand taste of the backbreaking labor that goes into every cup of coffee before it reaches the cafes. According to my bosses, the past couple of trips had been less than successful due to what certain of our farming and trading partners perceived as a lack of curiosity from the *Americanos*. There were also whispers of employees who might've overindulged on certain substances on past trips, which had been looked upon unfavorably by our Guatemalan hosts.

So this time, despite the fact that I had not yet been with the company for the requisite calendar year, they would be sending me as a glorified chaperone. The plan seemed pretty reasonable, since I can talk to most people about pretty much anything (once I get going), they hoped that my presence might prime the pump of question asking – the fact that I, as a teetotaling tricenarian might be seen as a potential narc, was just cake frosting to the company.

But then I got the call.

What I was able to glean through the selective omissions was this: an Australian national, who had initially accepted a place in the Photo/Media program, was denied a student visa at the last possible minute due to some derogatory information in their legal record. So they had withdrawn their acceptance in the days before the first classes after what I imagine was much bureaucratic hoop jumping and personal consternation. So now there was a spot open and, although it was highly unorthodox to do so, it was being offered to me – and not because I was already living in Seattle, a point to which my general anxiety and pride made me ask for clarification multiple times.

I cried a little when I told my bosses at the coffee company that I was considering accepting the offer. I don't know why I cried exactly, but it happened. They responded unexpectedly by pretty much refusing to let me quit out of hand. They insisted that I stay on in a part-time capacity, at least through spring 2020. My inner cynic believes that this was probably because they knew that they could extract more or less the same value from my labor at less than half the pay and with none of the paid benefits. My inner compassionate realist is more inclined to believe that they probably like me and didn't want to try to find someone with the same soft skills who would work for what they had been paying me.

Whatever the motivation from the university or the coffee company, I accepted the spot in the Photo/Media program and used the \$9k recruitment fellowship to immediately pay off that predatory personal loan. I then proceeded to start adding to the pot of federal student loan debt that has been hanging over me since undergrad.

Here we are. It's June 2021 and it's been nearly two years since I got that phone call while cleaning toilets. The graduating MFA class of 2021 got *almost* two full quarters of on-campus education before the global pandemic forced the world to shut down and now the only phone calls I get are scams.

In these nearly two years: I was officially diagnosed with ADHD, herniated a disc in my lumbar spine, and had two distinct major depressive episodes for which I have not been able to receive clinical treatment (because the whole world seems to be having a major depressive episode). Also, I have made a few friends, made some art that I think is alright, done some writing that I'm actually proud of, and moved in with my boyfriend of 3 years. Two weeks ago, I officially resigned from my position at that coffee company, even though I functionally had stopped working for them months ago.

Judging the experience of *Pandemic Grad School* against *Grad School As It Might've Been* is an unfair rubric. I do still have my critiques and quibbles with how the institution handled things – particularly relating to the first quarter of lockdown-induced remote education and all the incoming freshmen and outgoing seniors who paid caviar prices for porridge. So much less than what was promised by those endless stacks of purple and gold marketing materials.

My boyfriend and I biked through the university grounds the other day. We were heading to the Henry Gallery to look at the MFA show (“my” show). It was the middle of the day so all of the high-powered LEDs that had recently been posted on the perimeter of the Drumheller Fountain were switched off. Instead of reflecting the psychedelic purple wash that the LEDs provide in the evening, the towering jets of water only reflected the muted grey of a pregnant sky. Still, posted on the perimeter of the fountain at every quadrant, there were smiling soon-to-be graduates posing in their \$50 matched sets of acetate gowns and cardboard caps. (“Cap and Gown” n.d.) Their photos won't really show the deep disappointment that I know many of them feel about going to school in the past 15 months, the pandemic months. Their toothy grins, wreathed in polyester tassels and cords, look pretty much the same as they might have in any other year. And so will the photos. The fountain is on. The water jets are freshly renovated. Maybe if they don't look at the photos for a few years, it'll blunt the remembering.

After looking at the show at the Henry, my boyfriend and I sat on the small stairs just outside of the gallery, the stairs that lead up to the towering bronze George Washington statue that (for now) looks out west toward the still snowy peaks of the Olympics. Every time that I passed that statue in the days leading up to the opening of the exhibition, I was vaguely reminded of the tens-of-thousands of George Washingtons that I now owe to the government upon completion of this, my second degree. Maybe I'll be able to find a better job with degree number two? Or maybe all federal student debts will be cancelled? Or the State will collapse and a different future will become available to me? What's more likely is that an inevitable pandemic-amnesia will set in and all of those twenty-somethings in cardboard hats and I will look back on the photos we took and the work we made with just the smallest soupçon of yearning for the ghost of what this all might've, could've, should've been.

So we're sitting on those steps in front of the Henry Gallery and I kind of lost it. My boyfriend listened patiently – I really love him a lot. After hearing my ten minute frustrated soliloquy, he said that now that all of this – school, the horror of the early days of the pandemic, my job – is ending, I'll need to take some time to process what's happened and try to make sense of what this has all meant. Maybe even mourn.

I responded, "how can I begin to mourn when I'm not done dying?"



Figure 5: Work by Henry Detweiler installed at the Henry Gallery for the 2021 MFA Thesis exhibition.
Photo by Henry Detweiler

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