

Manor of Memory

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University of Washington

Memory begins in neurons, racing back and forth from the hippocampus to the cortex of the brain. This book explores how malleable and unreliable memory can be; how it manifests in the body: mentally, physically, emotionally; how it mutates and betrays as we age. Through a series of scientific and historical briefs, poetic meditations and memory experiments, I invite the reader to witness my attempt of rewriting moments of trauma while coming to terms with a family in the early stages of memory loss.

Manor of Memory

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Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Renee Gladman, thesis advisor

Interdisciplinary Arts & Sciences

Think of two people, living together day after day,  
year after year, in this small space...bumping against each  
other's bodies by mistake or on purpose, sensually,  
aggressively, awkwardly, impatiently, in rage or in love—  
think what deep though invisible tracks they must leave,  
everywhere, behind them—  
Christopher Isherwood

My husband is home.

He squeezes in next to me in the booth real close. I can smell his familiar cologne again. We'd run away to the ocean to a small inn we love, one we return to after every deployment. We need to bridge the intimacy we shared before he left with the strange familiarity we now experience— when you know someone so well but haven't touched or interacted in an extended period of time. My cheeks flush when our arms graze each other— eyes meet, locking in a longing we've been trying to define for years.

I swish through photos on my phone, showing him what he missed while he was away. I don't need to show him [he knows already] but every time he insists, I think, because the pain of not being present helps him be even more present when he is home.

One summer I had hair that stretched down toward my navel and I was desperate to cut it off. I sent him pictures of short bobs that I'd been obsessing over, dreaming of summers without drizzled hair wrapping around my neck. He replied: "Please don't cut your hair, not at least until I come home."

I was annoyed; why should I have to wait for him? What difference could it make? But to him it was about time and change. He left with the memory of me with long brown hair he'd comb fingers through in the winter before resting it on

my neck, insulated from the cold. In the period of time he was gone he knew change was inevitable, things were going to carry on here with or without him and little was within his control. He clung to the memory of the person he left behind, silently crying in the airport with hair cascading down as a shield. Returning home to a short black-bobbed woman would have felt jarring and foreign; a symbol that the clock hadn't stopped. It was only then that I saw it as endearing; cohesion and consistency were necessary to his memory to stay safe and regulated while overseas. Two weeks after he returned, I cut it all off.

We spend the weekend walking the boardwalks of the beach, his fingertips grazing my naked neck.

The word 'memory' stems from the Greek word 'mnemosyne', which bore the Greek titan goddess of the same name. Daughter of Uranus and Gaea, and mother to the nine muses (Zeus being the father), Mnemosyne is one of the most prominent and powerful characters in early Greek theology.

In many instances, characters in early Greek literature became possessed by Mnemosyne, creating a conduit of sorts, to reflect on personal and cultural events that she had documented from the past.

Her existence was actively present in both their daily lives and their after lives. When individuals died and encountered the God of the underworld, Hades, their souls approached two rivers: Lethe and Mnemosyne. Before being reincarnated, they would be given the choice to drink from either river: Lethe effectively clearing the slate and erasing your past lives; or Mnemosyne, giving the individual omniscient qualities to remember elements of former lives.

Existing in a pre-literacy era, the Greeks only understood the retention of knowledge through memorization. When learning a new skill, familial story, or cultural anecdote, the townsmen channeled Mnemosyne to assist the recollection process. Men were specifically trained to 'exercise' their brains daily in an effort to strengthen their memory; to carry the mental burden of remembering.

The complete history of their society existed solely in the minds of men.

Sitting around a bon fire, men would regale families and friends with adventurous tales set to music and meter. Men would follow the musicality of each epic, built into a hexameter rhythm, filling in blanks as they went. Through constant repetition and rhyming, literary and cultural traditions were preserved through performative recitation.

The only record of Mnemosyne, her muses, and their gifts appear in Hesiod's *Theogony* (7<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.), an epic poem in which the narrator documents the history and spectacle surrounding the titans and gods who reside over Greece. The significance in this case is *Theogony* is one of very few texts documenting Greek theology of gods and titans, including Homer's *Odyssey*. Mnemosyne played a crucial role in documenting memory in the oral tradition, and here Hesiod transferred that knowledge in written form in order to preserve her legacy of memory keeping.

But as their civilization developed, and letters were introduced as a new form of knowledge retention, Mnemosyne's function in their lives inevitably faded.

Human memories form and exist on a cellular level. Associations link one neuron to another and another, making up a pattern of neurons linking and firing in the auditory cortex of the brain. These patterns of neurons fire when an initial stimulus triggers a memory. As we sleep, our hippocampus relays information and moments back and forth to the cortex, etching the details into a more permanent status. This process called consolidation is how short term memories are converted and preserved as long term memories.

Our memories are divided up into four distinct categories depending on their context.

Procedural memory, stored in the cerebellum and putamen, contains details on every day actions such as riding a bike, brushing your teeth, or writing with a pen in your hand.

Semantic memories race back and forth from your cortex to your frontal lobes as you try to recall your mother's maiden name, the state capitol of Florida, or the hours of your favorite cafe. Semantic memory is rooted in fact, laid down by your cortex as useful information to preserve (in theory).

Episodic memories bring forth experiences in our lives we're recollecting, prompted or unprompted. When our senses are activated, be it by smell or sound, neurons in our cortex begin firing with the hippocampus before bringing some form of the memory forward.

The last category of memory resides in the amygdala. Instantaneous and striking, these memories bypass the standard process of consolidation through the hippocampus, foregoing long-term storage in the cortex. The amygdala is the house of trauma and fear.

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There is a personal and universal context to all our memories. Collectively we remember national events, accomplishments, and tragedies together. Within those occurrences we remember who we were with, where we were when these moments occurred, etc. We recollect speeches of our forefathers and speeches of our actual fathers. We play trivia games with each other about how long the Mississippi river is, or how long it's been since you've seen your aging grandparents. Our brains file these memories away, personal and universal, depending on the circumstance of the event.

When I was growing up my dad was perpetually boisterous—his voice boomed from his chest, a thunder all his own that I knew all my life. In anger or disbelief or elation, it always felt barely contained in his body, like his skin held back the form it needed to take to fully possess a room.

Unsteady with love but rich in its masculinity, his voice was a constant in my tiny world of change.

In my early 20s, we chased an enigmatic diagnosis that left my dad uncomfortably overweight, lacking sleep, and without a speaking voice for over a year. At restaurants, the waiters had to lean in to hear his order over quiet dinner chatter. He never wanted us to order for him. His laughter existed only in a rasp and a silent, stretching smile. He couldn't talk to us on the phone anymore. I had resigned my body to think I would never hear his voice again.

Towards the end, the will to care vacated his body; he stood outside on his porch, smoke escaping his lips, as he whispered to his children:

“Nice of your aunts to visit. Randomly,” he says. I nod.

“Will you put the trash out on the—” louder, straining, “put the TRASH OUT ON THE CURB FOR ME?” I nod.

“Want to go out to dinner with them while they're here?”

“I don’t know. Not really up for it anymore.” A shrug existed as surrender.

“ \_\_\_\_\_ ”

Seeing his warm breath hit the cold night air was the only indication to me that he was still alive.

My aunts flew up from California to help clean his house and say goodbye to him. He was out of doctors. He was out of work. He was out of money.

As the memory of Mnemosyne faded gradually, and cognitive exercises were traded for linguistic studies, one individual was quite vocal about his distrust of a written language. In *The Phaedrus*, Plato argues the debilitating effects written discourse will have on their community and on the world: “it will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing...you have not discovered the potion for remembering, but for reminding.”

He considered the movement toward memory documentation a weakness, a move that would deteriorate the ability to recollect facts and events going forward.

Plato was romanced by the fluidity of memory—the recollection or recitation of memory presented a movement in the mind, allowing room for revision and improvisation when necessary. Documenting these occasions in writing, he speculated, cemented the moments forever, removing the opportunity for revision or influence. These “fixed, formalized” records hindered an individuals’ creativity in the process.

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Memories that haven't gone through the consolidation process yet are like clay waiting to dry—they're vulnerable to malleability. Most things we perceive in a normal day fade within hours [if that]:

“Do I remember physically turning my oven knob to off?”

“What did she say about her weekend?”

“I think I ate breakfast today?”

Small glimpses of these trivial moments linger to throw sticks in our spokes. Every day our brain rewires neurons and tampers with our memory.

The process most damaging to memories is recall. Every time we call upon a memory for our own personal use or to share with others, what we remember, however, is not THE picture of the event but A picture. The same neurons fire and bring forth every element that composes the moment, but the details are indistinct.

When you relive a memory, perhaps you give the impression of more confidence than you originally had, you act like someone didn't bother you, when in reality they did. When the memory goes back into storage your hippocampus re-writes the memory to add your edits before storing it in the cortex. If it's ever recalled again, your brain may only showcase the new and improved memory you tampered with before.

Researchers early on introduced the Interference Theory, proving how simple it is to plant a memory in someone else's memory bank. Through a series of experiments, scientists showed videos to patients followed by a list of questions. By opening the discussions with misleading questions and reports, they confused the subjects into thinking events occurred in the video that never actually happened. The test subjects were convinced they were right until they were shown the videos again.

Gaslighting is another term for memory tampering. Often appearing in abusive relationships, or exploited by sociopaths and narcissists, gaslighting is the blatant manipulation of someone else's memory. The events of firm long-term memories are denied by one person, resulting in the victim questioning the credibility of their own memory. This protects the guilty party and prevents the innocent from coming forward with evidence or accusations.

Our hippocampus is always at work storing memories for short and long term use. There is nothing to protect us from false or misleading memories being planted by others or by ourselves.

\*

Has a moment ever haunted you?

Maybe you recollect a moment often to muddle the details or you hope it dissipates over time. Would you alter a memory, if you could?

I relive a moment of hesitation all the time. A moment of guarded contemplation. A regret of immobility. Maybe, after years of believing I had done it differently, it'll be so.

MANIPULATE.

~~I pick you up from your friend's wedding in the backwoods of Buckley. You wouldn't come out of the venue hall; lips locked with your favorite glass of whiskey.~~

~~My head is pounding from the night before; my 21<sup>st</sup> run on the town, the one you weren't invited to. I pull up to our farmhouse and the distance you keep from my body, normally the plea I wake with on my lips, vanishes as your anger becomes known. I feel it tremoring up my spine; my hands start to shake.~~

~~You corner me in the house, outside eyes no longer watching, holding you accountable. You tell me I embarrassed you at the wedding, hung over and looking wrecked, leaving early for temporary convalescence. I'm not behaving how a woman should. You force me to my knees to beg for forgiveness, for understanding. To beg for you to keep me.~~

~~You begin to unbutton your tux. My muscles tense and I start to sweat, a chain reaction set in motion whenever you undress in front of me now. I look at the tux, how it sits awkwardly on your overweight frame, tight and unnatural.~~

~~You force me to beg for a wedding ring, one I know I don't want anymore, a fact I haven't worked up the heart [or spine] to tell you. You yell that the figures we witnessed standing in that church today making vows could have been us, if only I'd~~

~~been the exact type of woman you want. I've been crying but you just notice. You cup my face, your calloused fingers running the line of my jaw, a moment of tenderness you give as if I'm thirsting for it, before asking me to take my clothes off.~~

~~We have to fix this, you say.~~

~~I sob as the breath I held escapes from my chest. You lower me down onto you in the middle of our living room, your tux pants pulled down to your ankles. You don't allow me to be passive; I can't lie here waiting for your release, legs lackadaisically around your body. You force me to ride you and never ask me to stop crying.~~

~~It's July—the setting sun pours in through the south windows. I can hear the horses on the farm running through tall grass. The apple trees just outside the living room window are bearing fruit and gnats have begun to convene around the drooping branches. I feel you run your fingers possessively over my hips and up my glistening back.~~

~~When you finish, you help me off of you and then grab water from the fridge. You clean your guns while watching a movie I hate. Your posture the status of indifference.~~

~~I throw up my lunch and skip dinner, avoiding whatever room you enter.~~

As I began writing this book, my husband got orders to New Jersey. I put my thesis on memory away while I wrapped up a house overflowing with it.

Our whole relationship exists in this house— I can feel it breathing in every room I walk through.

Our memory palace is disintegrating before our eyes and by our hands. In selling, we are evicting memories, leaving them to fade and be overridden by others.

These spaces that house our lives become territories of activation. Milestones of the mundane and extraordinary occur within certain walls, memories that cannot be replicated or packed with care to move to another location.

Moving the dresser to stage the house I find dried rose petals from when he proposed. We wipe down tree sap off of vaulted ceilings from Christmas after Christmas of fifteen foot trees. Carpet fibers trap and trace a life.

I lament for weeks, torn by the thrill of a life on the east coast and the desire to maintain comfort on the west coast.

“All our memories are contained in this house,” I tell him, “it’s hard to let it go.”

“We’ll make new memories then. That’s not something we’ll ever stop doing.”

My husband has been in the military for over a decade now. Throughout our relationship, he's been sent overseas almost every year for months at a time. In the beginning it devastated me— I'd crumble in on myself at every missed video chat or extended return date.

Then he deployed again.

Then he deployed again.

And it got easier.

He missed birthdays. He missed anniversaries. He missed parties. He missed readings. He missed holidays. He missed every days.

He missed ~~28 months~~. 34 months.

I've made many memories while he was away, and after a while he could feel the void he left, could almost see the space in the frame left open for him. And then after more time he realized I was no longer leaving space for his body.

Every time he came home, it was as if the memories he accumulated while away were off the table. He'd be desperate to go on a weekend trip to the ocean, or plan a date night in the city— anything to begin the process of making up for all the moments he missed.

He takes me on vacations while he's home, transporting our state of mind from deployment life to post-deployment-lets-try-hard-for-normalcy life. 'Let's take a picture' rolls off his tongue with every other breath. Each trip he hopes will produce pictures that will replace every frame/every profile image/every evidence of the life I've led without him here. We can live and linger forever inside a frame.

"When was this photo taken?"

"Who were you with here?"

"I wonder what country I was in then."

Am I a memory romantic?

I'm a ghost unwilling to leave these shared spaces after everyone else has vacated. My husband left toward his new residence without a second glance back at the house we shared for six years. I sit in front of the fireplace, in our hollow home, crying over all that's bound to be lost.

\*

Sometimes memories overlap. Bleed into each other like merging rivulets.

Why is it my joyful memories are hazy and muddled together, overlapping and envious of space, but the painful ones are so singular, so distinct. I can feel their rough edges, on a page break all to themselves. They take up more room in my body, space I cannot seem to control. They hide behind intestines, just out of reach, or in stretch marks lingering on my thighs. Even my uterus offers a place of refuge.

Can I give up this body when I have filled it with too many memories?

Can I clear the slate then?

we met at the coffee shop i hate on st.  
helens ave in tacoma. we sat across  
from you. there was dirt under your  
finger nails and dark rings around  
your eyes. you asked me how finals  
went, nodding and listening with  
intent. or care. or maybe apathy.

you slid miniature bottles of tequila & rum across the table, then said you couldn't be  
friends with us anymore. i had your christmas present in my purse. i was livid, and yelled,  
i think. you just sat there and took it. our espressos arrived and we paused:

then you said  
again, she  
won't let you  
be friends with  
us. when you  
hugged us  
goodbye, why  
did you smile?  
what did i  
miss?

it was raining. no. it was sunny this time. It was july. you held my hand on your favorite couch. steam was rising from the coffee cup in your other hand. your eyes wiggled now when you focused on an object/subject. you said it comes with age. i asked to hear your stories from the war again, knowing it would be the last. you smiled. you pointed to a picture of me on your favorite coffee table and said i was your angel. the hearing aids you employed whistled from your ears often. you told me the stories this time, i think, then attempted to rise to make breakfast. your round belly was gone; you were swimming in your sweaters. your knees shook, even with braces. you had a full dinner that night with us, then died in september.

we met at the coffee shop i hate on st. helens ave in tacoma. we sat across from you. there was dirt under your finger nails and dark rings around your eyes. you asked me how finals went, nodding and listening with intent. or care. or maybe apathy.

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when i learned i could  
be a human being alone  
i sat in a museum  
in seattle  
the rain beat down  
on the windows lights flickered  
from the storm and i encountered  
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and  
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it was noon on a wednesday. those days we lived  
in a salt-rimmed existence. the margaritas  
ping-ponged around our shaking bodies,  
giggling. in darkness, we laid on the floor in our  
tiny campus office. we wrote a poem to explain/  
to capture/ to tell someone (maybe us) why  
these events were happening/ were justifiable at  
that moment. that was in may.  
i saw you last week. finally. we hadn't yet  
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I pay a stranger to touch me  
and i'm reminded

again  
how it feels  
to be human  
in possession  
of a body.

are you  
understudy father?  
fill the role  
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sweat collected at the crooks of my knees. i paced/sat down/paced/sat  
time the automatic doors flew open. i hadn't worn underwear that day. you  
down in the passenger terminal at mechor. my skirt fluttered up every



when i learned i could  
it was raining. no. it was sunny this time. It was july. you held my hand on your favorite couch. steam was rising  
be a human being alone

i sat in a museum  
from the coffee cup in your other hand. your eyes wiggled now when you focused on an object/subject. you said it  
in seattle

the rain beat down  
comes with age. i asked to hear your stories from the war again, knowing it would be the last. you smiled. you  
on the windows lights flickered

from the storm and i encountered  
pointed to a picture of me on your favorite coffee table and said i was your angel. the hearing aids you employed  
martha rosler and

kehinde wiley and  
whistled from your ears often. you told me the stories this time, i think, then attempted to rise to make breakfast.  
and

i was getting your texts  
your round belly was gone; you were swimming in your sweaters. your knees shook, even with braces. you had a full  
but i kept pushing them

back into my purse  
dinner that night with us, then died in september. will you  
fill the role

I pay a stranger to touch me  
and i'm reminded

again  
how it feels  
to be human  
in possession  
of a body.

are you  
understudy father?  
when he inevitably  
calls in sick?  
i shake the hands  
of your colleagues

it was noon on a wednesday those days we lived  
in a salt-rimmed existence the margaritas  
giggling. in darkness, we laid on the floor in our  
tiny campus office. we wrote a poem to explain/  
to capture/ to tell someone (maybe us) why  
these events were happening/ were justifiable at  
that moment. that was in may.  
i saw you last week. finally. we hadn't yet  
forgotten about it.

we met at the coffee shop i hate on st.  
helens ave in tacoma. we sat across  
from you. there was dirt under your  
finger nails and dark rings around

your eyes. you asked me how finals  
went, nodding and listening with  
intent. or care. or maybe apathy.

in our pockets as our livers sip slowly from  
happy hour sangrias

you slid miniature bottles of tequila & rum across the table, then said you couldn't be  
friends with us anymore. i had your christmas present in my purse. i was livid, and yelled,

i think. you just sat there and took it. our espressos arrived and we paused  
again, she

won't let you  
be friends with  
my mother

us. when you  
hugged us i smell the aroma of coffee  
goodbye, why  
jasmine and vanilla the fragrance of youth

what did i  
miss? expectant visitor. wrapped in overflow  
my own as my mother decorates herself  
in modest ancestral pearls

the tattered burgundy pews became seats of transcendence  
r us up through ornate stained glassed windows we  
e juice disguised as matured wine from

you sent a flash

you sent a flash

you sent a flash

you sent a flash

you sent a flash



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and

i was getting your texts  
your round belly was gone; you were swimming in your sweaters. your knees shook, even with braces. you had a full  
but i kept pushing them

back into my purse  
grandpa is that night with us, then died in september. will you  
grandpa is.

the smell of home burnt coffee lingering from the kitchen  
twenty year old dust dies on shelves that can no longer be

i pay a stranger to touch me  
reached you exist in my other childhood  
and i'm reminded

the could-have-been childhood—  
tepid sand between painted toes instead of pine needles  
how it feels

entangled in my hair, worn down flannels  
became your second skin until you traded them in  
in possession

for stiff hospital gowns.  
grandpa was  
grandpa was

grandpa was  
grandpa was

we met at the coffee shop that was not a was  
helens ave in tacoma. we sat as not an is

from you. there was dirt under your an is  
finger nails and dark wings or an is

your eyes. you asked me how finals  
tequila. it's always tequila. a trifecta of tequila.  
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intent. or care. or maybe apathy.  
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won't let you  
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my mother

us. when she enfolded me in her familiar idyll,  
bugged us i smell the aroma of coffee

goodbye, why  
jasmine and vanilla the fragrance of youth

did you smile?  
linger on my mother's neck, accompanied

miss expectant visitor. wrapped in overflow  
my own as my mother decorates herself

in modest ancestral pearls  
the tattered burgundy became seats of transcendence

us up through ornate stained glassed windows we  
juice disguised as matured wine from

are you  
understudy father?  
fill the role  
when he inevitably  
calls in sick?  
i shake the hands  
of your colleagues  
you introduced me  
with memorized stats  
it was noon on a wednesday those days we lived  
in a salt-rimmed existence the margaritas  
ping-ponged around our shaking bodies,  
giggling in darkness. we laid on the floor in our  
tiny campus office. we wrote a poem to explain  
to capture/ to tell someone (maybe us) why  
these events were happening/ were justifiable at  
that moment. that  
i saw you last week. finally. we hadn't yet  
forgotten about it.

again.

slipped a hand up my skirt. your mother was calling. then she called again.

could feel my makeup run in the august heat. on the way home, you

you found me before picking up your bags. You said i was beautiful.

called from the plane to say you hadn't worn underwear that day. you

time the automatic doors flew open. i paced/sat at the crooks of my knees. i

down in the passenger terminal at mechor. my skirt itched every

sweat collected at the crooks of my knees. i paced/sat

out of the dark

& towards you

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In 1953, 27 year old Henry Molaison [H.M. for short] went in for surgery to remove a small part of his brain. He had been diagnosed with epilepsy at a young age and suffered from seizures regularly. During surgery, Doctor Scoville removed H.M.'s amygdala and most of his hippocampus, which at that time shared a similar reputation with the appendix for being benign and a bit worthless.

As he recovered from surgery, his seizures were revealed to be gone, but so was his short term memory. He could recall his life up until 27 but couldn't recall anything that occurred to him just fifteen minutes before.

In a medical breakthrough studied around the world, scientists and doctors finally discovered the significance the hippocampus has to the preservation of memory. Over the next fifty years, H.M. was studied extensively, from MRIs to memory tests, he was always happy and willing to help...once it was explained, again, why he was helping. His high I.Q. hadn't changed and aspects of his personality remained the same, but H.M. was unable to lay down any new episodic memories.

Through a series of brainteasers it was revealed procedural memory, like learning a new language or riding a bike, remained. They had him write and draw designs while looking at a mirror to watch himself work. Without knowledge of how to accomplish the task, H.M. was able to slightly perform the

task that was asked of him, improving every time they had him try it. Semantic memory also remained present but extremely limited, allowing him to pick up new facts or statistics about pop culture or politics on a small scale.

When he died in 2008, there was a long line of individuals and organizations who wanted his brain for scientific research. Streaming live from the University of California, San Diego campus, thousands of people watched the 54 hour dissection of H.M.'s brain. Scientists continue to study his brain and acknowledge his case as one of the biggest neuro breakthroughs for science and memory.

Up to his death he had to continuously be re-introduced to others, and re-introduced to himself daily. Expecting to see his 27 year old self in the mirror, he would have to be consoled when he saw an old man staring back at him.

\*

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sigmund Freud began treating female patients who were diagnosed as ‘hysterical’. Through a series of hypnosis and touch therapy, Freud uncovered unconscious memories of trauma that the patients couldn’t recall in their waking moments. He considered his investigations like unlocking a door of repressed memories. Lying on worn couches, women laid their unconscious minds bare for Freud to prod around in. He was the first individual to connect how trauma affects our minds and bodies. After some losses and some successes, Freud moved away from touch therapy and hypnosis in an effort to understand why memories are buried rather than what is buried.

John Locke, a 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, looked at memory as the blueprints of our identity. He believed our memories and experiences helped build character and changed the way we choose to behave throughout life. He disliked the practice of repeated memorization, arguing that the self will naturally remember what it deems necessary and important. He viewed memory as a storehouse, a building to hoard ideas, waiting for a particular moment in time to revive certain memories. “They are actually nowhere, but only there is an ability in the mind, when it will, to revive them again; and as it were paint them anew on itself.”



“You should talk to me.”

“About what, mom?”

“Everything? Anything? I would take anything at this point.”

“There’s nothing to share. I’m good.”

“I hope you share more with your therapist then. That relationship couldn’t have been easy to deal with, not to mention navigating the eating d—”

“Mom,” I stop her. “I’m good. Promise.”

She had picked me up from the rehab facility forty-five minutes ago and I was already thinking about what injuries I might sustain from jumping out of her moving vehicle.

She studies me at the dinner table and I can almost see her cataloging everything I eat, night after night, nodding at random moments while chewing.

My mother recommends I see a therapist when my second series of migraines clusters the month of March.

APRIL

MAY

JUNE—

The tension headaches increase in frequency— the throbbing in my shoulders; the ache down my calves. My psychiatrist, Dr. Clark, is hitting a wall with me. I enjoy sitting in silence with her in that tiny room, every wall lined with books, but I don't imagine she enjoys the silence like I do. I picked up on her irritated ticks early on—a pen tapping lightly against her thigh; a furtive glance to the clock; jotting down a note after a long stretch of quiet. I couldn't see her session notes but I'm sure scribbled somewhere on her legal notepad were notes such as “aversion to vulnerability” or “stubbornness a major characteristic flaw”. We talk about everything, sometimes, except for what we need to talk about.

She recommends massage therapy to tackle the physical manifestations of stress in my body, thinking it might be an avenue to open the psychological manifestations she says I'm currently unable or unwilling to share.

◇

I start seeing a masseuse bi monthly. She's a close friend.

"Shit. You have a ton of knots in your body."

"I know."

"Like... a minefield of knots."

"I get it."

She turns on an instrumental and works the lavender oil into  
my skin in circles:

clockwise

rubbing

clockwise

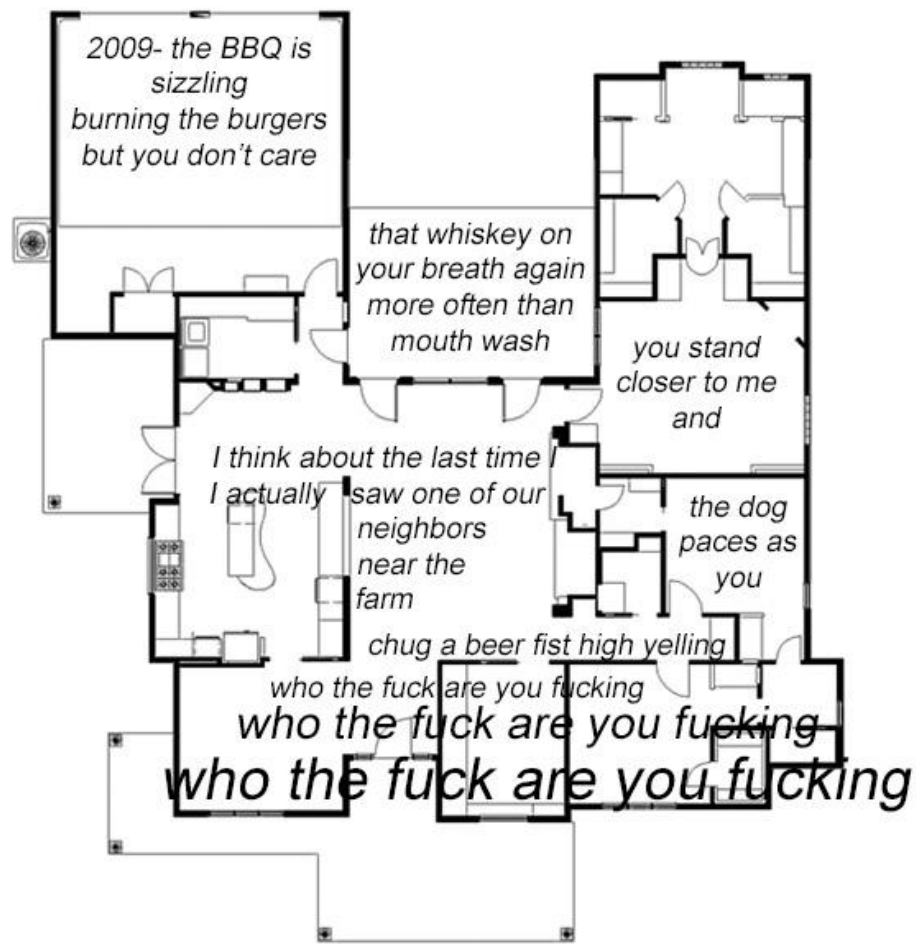
kneading

rubbingkneadingrubbingkneading

She lightly works a few knots at a time; conjoined knots.

Knots plotting.

"There are stretches I'd recommend to help prevent this kind  
of damage, and..."



“Did you nod off?”

The stereo is already on track 10. The session clock has ten till.

My body is oiled and cool. Lavender fills my pores but I feel worse. She rinses her hands methodically— down to elbows and under fingernails.

“These knots I worked out will now allow more blood to flow in the previously cramped muscles. You’ll be in pain for a bit but it’ll fade eventually.”

“How are the massages going?” My mom asks, flipping through the mail on her front coffee table.

“They’re going.” My mom purses her lips. I don’t want to tell her about where my mind wanders during my sessions or how painful the appointments are. I reach down idly and run my fingers along my left calf, realizing with relief one of the bigger knots has disappeared.

“And your follow up appointments with Dr. Clark at the facility?”

“Also happening still. I wouldn’t skip them.”

“I wasn’t insinuating you were skipping, I was wondering if you were talking to her yet.”

“Well, sure. She says hello. I say hello. It’s been grand so far.” She drops the mail down and shoots me a look.

“Dammit, you know what I mean. You’re living here at home now, which I’m fine with, of course, but I expect a certain level of respect. Do you think I haven’t gone through anything like this at one point? Why won’t you just talk to me about it if you won’t talk to others?” I chew on my lip but meet her gaze.

“There isn’t much to talk about. I’m feeling better.” Lying seems to be what I do best these days.



I book another appointment with my masseuse.

She tells me massage & acupuncture hones in on essential pressure points—the muscle map of my body. She tells me the knots under my shoulder blades & up my neck are stretching my muscles like a rubber band. My wilted posture is changing the shape. My body has acclimated to tension.

She tells me:

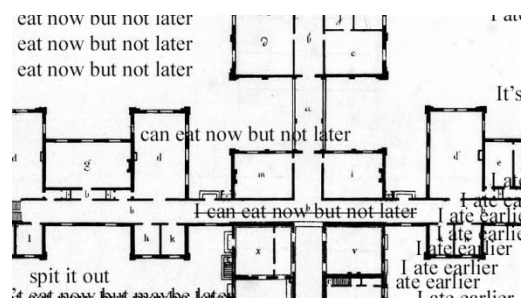
pressure & release

pressure & release

pressure & release

I ask her just to get rid of them.

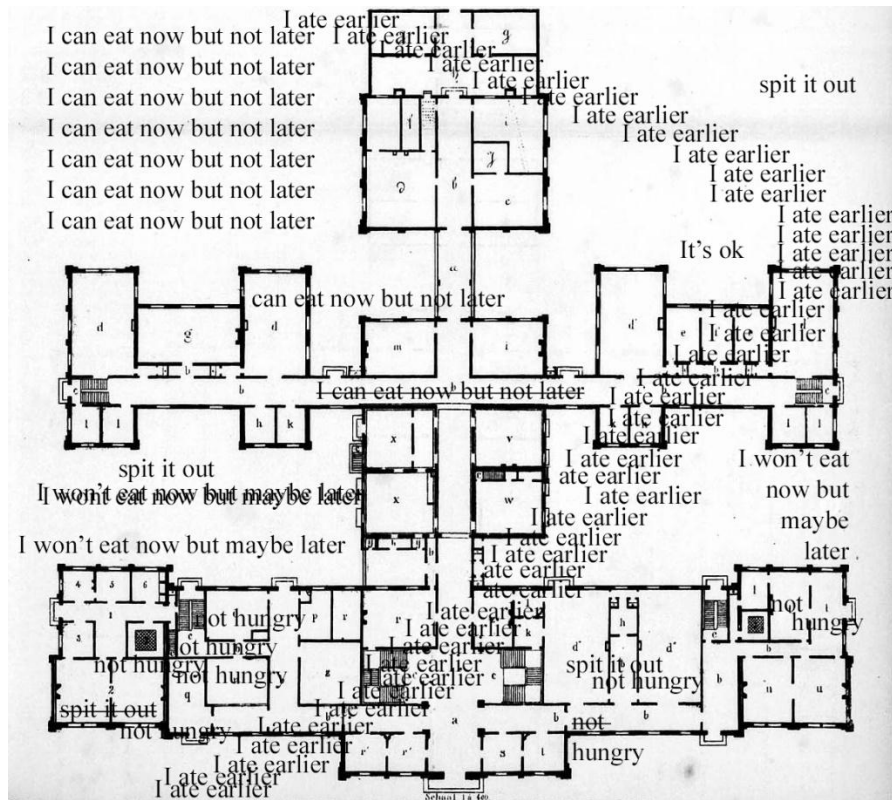
Laying on the table face down, she twists my arm back, scooping fingers under the blade. She rubs around a knot, circling it, applying pressure until it's unbearable.



I squeeze my eyes shut. Let out a gasp from deep in my lungs.

She asks if the pressure is too much.

“Keep going.”



I ask if it's gone yet. She shrugs and hands me a glass of water.

"Time to flush the toxins."

I schedule a follow up for Friday, even though she doesn't recommend this frequency. As she washes the oil from her hands she says over her shoulder: "You get so quiet during your appointments. Most of my clients like to talk—about their jobs, their spouses, whatever. You don't seem inclined to do that."

"Do I need to talk?"

"I don't know," she says, finally meeting my glance. "Do you?" I look over at the massage table, the donut-shaped hole where my face just lay.

“It’s weird, but I don’t feel anxious when I come here. Or afraid. I can just be for a bit.” It’s been awhile since I found a space that affords me that liberty. I find something in the quiet.

She nods as she finishes drying her hands. “Some of my clients discover an emotional release in addition to their physical release post-massage—many even cry when it happens.” I stare at her blankly.

“I’m just sayin’, if you need to cry, do it. I’ve been friends with you for over a decade now and I’ve never seen you burst.”

Looking across the table from Dr. Clark, I readjust my skirt.

She smiles.

“How is your mother?”

“Prodding more and more often.”

“Have you opened up to her these past few months?” No.

“She knows what happened to me; why I was in the facility.”

I still could not say the word ‘rehab’.

“And your massage therapy sessions?” My eyebrows furrow in silence. “I’m taking it not well?”

“No,” I begin, “they’re going well. Some of my knots are gone and my tension headaches aren’t occurring as often. I’ve even been sleeping longer through the nights.”

“That’s excellent progress.” She turns a page in her notebook and scribbles something else. “Have you been keeping up with your food diary?” I pull it out of my bag and hand it over the desk to her. She studies a few pages closely, flips a few more pages and analyzes another note. “Looks like you’ve been eating pretty consistently. Are you experiencing any feelings of remorse post-meals?” Yes.

“No.”

Scribble.

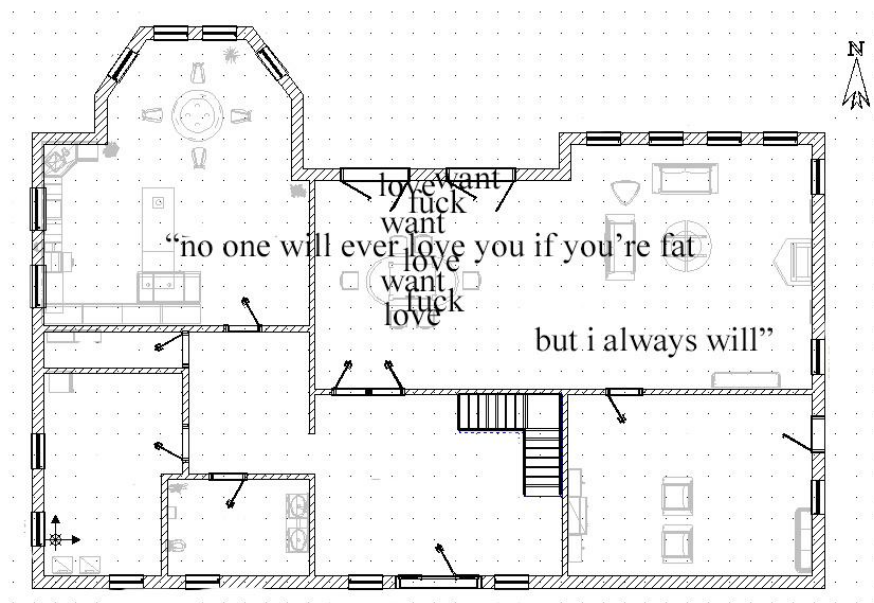
“Do you think you’re at a point now where you’re ready to talk about the abuse?”

I'm only aware of my knuckles tightening around the arms of the chair. The session clock dings on her desk and I exhale. She looks up, capturing an image of my relief, and jots it down.



I ask my masseuse friend to focus on specific pressure points this time, not knowing what the process will dredge up, but knowing it is necessary to eliminate these moments from my body. I want to feel healthy again. I want to be loved and have the capacity to love others. I want to try to live in the shape of my body. Whatever shape that may take. I want to purge and renew. I want to be possessed, again, by the feeling of being alive—in excitement, in desire, in elation, in confusion, in pain and in love.

She works a knot that has been lingering in my thighs. Oil slicks and shines on her fingertips. I grimace as her fingertips graze stretchmarks but swiftly she moves, glistening and propelled by coconut oil. A quick flinch jolts from me involuntarily as she zeroes in on the knot. She shoots me a look, checking in on my pain tolerance. I nod.



She reapplies oil to her palms, smearing it back and forth to warm the liquid before applying it to my skin.

She runs two fingers along both sides of my spine and fans out—looking for more knots hiding in between muscles. Finding one in my lower back, she murmurs: “This one might hurt a bit more.” I link my fingers together under the table bracing myself, wondering, on this increasing scale of pain, when I would break. If I would.

She has me lean forward, inhaling the aroma therapy mix from her palms.

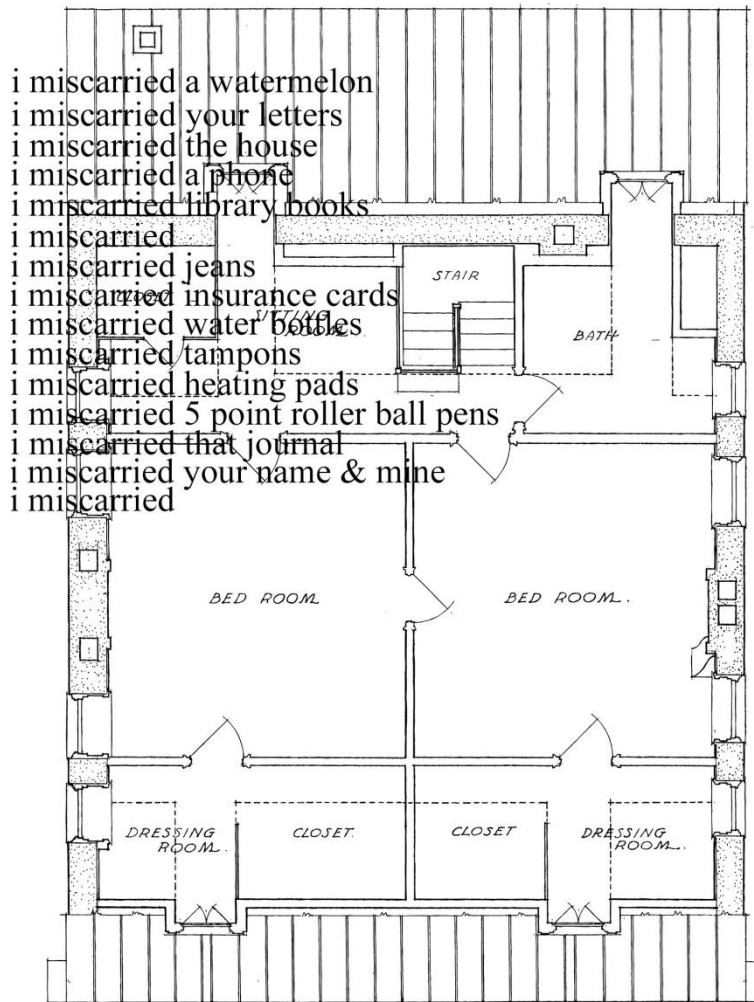
One deep breath in, one out.

One deep breath in, one out.

One more deep breath in, one out.

Thirty minutes into my appointment she glides up to the muscles that span my shoulders. I wonder if she saved this for last. She works one under my right shoulder blade—





SECOND FLOOR PLAN

D FURN WALL - DEF

A sharp exhale escapes my lips as pain shoots through my body, rippling from my thighs—lower back—arms—shoulder blades—echoing out, each ripple intensifying.

The arch of my neck recoils in response. My vision tunnels and my eyes burst. She pauses the session clock and dims the lights. Her motions feel choreographed, like this response is completely normal. Like she was expecting this outcome. I fight the urge to stifle the crying, choosing to embrace the uncomfortable abnormality I had become. Hesitantly she

places her palm on my naked back, small circled pats orbiting my shoulders.

“I don’t know what to say,” I breathe, hearing something in my voice between the sobs I don’t recognize. These words by themselves meant nothing, but strung together and filtered through my body, mixing with the pain and shock of release, I knew what it was: It was the sound of admission. I recognized sadness; had tasted denial on my tongue for months, mixed with saliva and stomach acid. But my muscles held guilt; held every skipped meal; held every “I love you/ I hate you”; every moment of betrayal I thought I had dealt with. I still feel the indentation of his fingerprints through dead skin on my body. For years my body belonged to his body—my hair, my tongue, the valley between my hips, the freckle behind my knee—his for occasional devotion, for revision, for relief, for perception, for sound and silence, for abuse. At this moment as tears escape me and the release still flows through newly freed muscles, I feel this body is mine again.

\*

I never visited my dad that day in the hospital. I want to believe I did.

I should have, but I didn't. I was in a relationship with a man who told me I needed to come home every day straight after work. If I wasn't prompt, he'd start drinking early. With the threat constantly looming over me from the blare of the morning alarm, I left my dad in a hospital room and went home to a man who loved to hate me.

I've stared down at empty pages more often than I'd like to admit. I'd reach back in my body, looking for words, the potentiality of sentences, but finding only visuals. Accessing memories in my body shook me.

A moment of trauma would fire— I'd probe every corner of it to document and manipulate, push through the space and expand it to find what I missed from before. I walked through every memory with my back to the boundaries of the space I explored, keeping my distance from him and from falling back into those moments of time. But my neck would throb with heat, glistening. My pupils dilated and my pulse hummed high in my ears. As if imagining him would summon him.

I'd burn down the houses I shared with him if it meant exorcising every memory of mine he possesses.

One evening I drove out to the country town I shared with him, not sure what I was looking for. There's a quiet hum of grasshoppers over this town. Pickup truck after pickup truck line the bars in the center of town like tiles. In the summers you could always hear cows bellowing one or two farms over; manure and fresh cut hay on the breeze.

I was high on adrenaline; I chewed on mints to keep my teeth from grinding. My body fought every turn I made through town, begging me to turn around, come to my senses

and run. Driving by the places that once haunted me, I saw his familiar shadow under vibrating fluorescent lights, enveloped in smoke, outside that same old bar.

The first time he coerced me into having sex he said it was for love. He said I should do it before he finds someone else. He said he fantasized about my thick thighs wrapped around him; tugging on my long hair. He wasn't gentle. He took what he saw was his and left the room. I reached down and blood slipped between my fingertips. I texted my best friend, the chat box littered with exclamation points, hiding what should have been question marks. I lived as an exclamation point when others asked about me and my life with him, never revealing the question mark that my body really was, over and over again.

I had given it once—therefore my body existed for his taking. And he did.

When I left him, my imagination spun tales—fantastical and wild. I imagined he'd fled, or been shamed into hiding; drank himself to death; ran off a Carbonado cliff with bourbon between his legs; became aware of the human being that he was. In every figment I created, he no longer had a corporeal body.

DIGESTIVE: on Friday nights you & I went to dinner in the small hick town where we lived. We'd meet your friends there & the evening would tip, licked by liquor, & you'd escape to the bar down the hall & around the corner. You'd go knowing I wasn't old enough to follow. A green-eyed doe trained to sit & obey. My intestines knotted—grew intimate with the tension of Friday nights. I crushed tums between teeth to balance the jitters. The taste on my tongue was metallic.

CIRCULATORY: irregular palpitations beat through a stethoscope, the doctor's question lingered in her furrowed brow: "what stresses exist in your daily life?"

INTEGUMENTARY: I pick at my cuticles until they bleed. Old habit rising from raised voices. And whiskey, of course. I pick to prepare as I consume uncertainty. I chew on broken nails to prevent me from speaking. The hair on my arms prick & sway; crescent-shaped depressions in my palms made the shape of my body.

MUSCULAR: shoulders slump & muscles contract—Tendons tense & flex; reactive. My knuckles knew the memory of curling into a pillow; the balance needed to demonstrate pleasure vs. fear.

REPRODUCTIVE: Friday night rewards— sour whiskey & coke on my throat, I compiled grocery lists in my head while you were inside me, eager, knuckles deep, sightseeing without a map of my body. Headlights passed by the window & set the room on fire. You didn't mind the chafing like I did, but you also didn't care.

ENDOCRINE: My menstrual blood set you off, knowing it bewitched me; replenished the power to my senses— a natural repellant to your good ol' country boy.

I'd let it run wild between thick thighs, savor in the space it created apart from you—

But I lived & breathed by the ten commandments of you because you told me to. If you'd raised your hand high, to strike or condemn, ruling menstruation a sin I would have plugged it up & prayed god to take the power from my undeserving ovaries.

SKELETAL: cartilage now pops when I get down on my knees. I was just crumpled bones in a moonlit room.

Before I went to sleep I'd whisper: am I even still a human being?

RESPIRATORY: I held my breath for five years— followed by a six month exhale that hurricaned through my blood & baptized my body.

NERVOUS: I've hollowed out my adrenal glands with a dirty spoon— wrung em & hung em out to dry— but that splash of spirits on your tongue or the tongues of others calls for shots of endorphins, tranquilizing senses while an overworked homeostasis clocks in & out and in & out, working nights & weekends.

LYMPHATIC: flushing you was a five year endeavor— cayenne pepper and liquid diets, night sweats & marathon retching, eliminated alcohol, ate seaweed & dandelion root, vinyasa'd under the moon, exfoliated dead skin, leaving you in supermarkets & alleyways, submerged myself in sex, cored myself like an apple & built myself back up bone by bone.

As we age, neurons fire less often while our cerebral engine loses shape and elasticity. Cognitive disruption begins to occur as blood flow to the frontal and temporal lobes slows, missing connections with synapses that are struggling to connect. The overall lobe volume of our brain shrinks as neurological processes prioritize what's more important: remembering to mail our bills or retaining that second language we've let slip.

Gradual memory loss is expected, significant memory loss is a symptom. In the beginning it's hard to notice— missing a deadline, forgetting a family dinner— before it unfolds into missing your exit home and forgetting your spouse's name. Dementia takes shape in many forms, most recognizably as Alzheimer's. The cause of the disease is still unknown, but health, environment, and genetics all play a factor.

Alzheimer's disease damages and, eventually, kills healthy nerve cells in your brain, ruining the synaptic connections irreparably. Our frontal cortex may call upon a memory but discovers the hippocampus has already taken a seat on the bench.

Doctors often measure the shrinkage occurring in a patient's temporal or parietal lobes to indicate the loss of nerve cells, the primary test that diagnoses the disease. Sometimes they run basic short-term memory tests. Rarely do they draw blood or spinal fluid in an attempt to rule out other medical

conditions. Typically within a year of an AD diagnosis, the brain shrinks severely and begins to affect not only memory, but behavioral and cognitive functions. No longer will you be able to prioritize your own life properly, or even recognize that you're encountering issues making decisions on your own.

Occasionally doctors will prescribe supplements containing Acetylcholine (ACh), a chemical produced naturally in your brain that strengthens learning and memory. Drugs containing ACh could potentially help improve memory, but it's merely a band aid.

You'll tell the same stories over and over again, the ones you actually remember, as your family and friends nod and smile. Knowingly. You leave the stove on. You let your talents lapse. You forget family traditions. You forget that you are forgetting.

\*

Don't forget, Nicole is coming to visit next week.

She is? That's wonderful.

\*

Don't forget, Nicole is coming to visit in a few days.

She is? Ok.

\*

Don't forget, Nicole will be here in two days.

Who?

Your granddaughter.

Oh yes. It'll be so good to see her.

\*

Don't forget, Nicole will be at our house tomorrow around 9am.

She's visiting? What a lovely surprise.

FALSIFY.

My dad lies in a hospital bed, out of breath, his voice stolen by illness. The teal hospital gown looks foreign on his large body. The hospital room is barren apart from the TV and miscellaneous anxiety-inducing medical equipment. He misses his dogs. He misses his lighthouse figurines. He misses his big screen TV.

“This room gets *horrible* reception,” he whispers, “I have a DVR at home full of my shows I’m missing.” I nod. The room doesn’t even have a window—anything I can stare out of to avoid eye contact. An open nothingness I can let my eyes relax into, blurring the reality in front of me.

“They keep giving me turkey sandwiches that taste days old.” I offer to bring him some of his favorites, our family pasta dish, concocting a plan to smuggle it in. He shrugs.

My younger brother slumps his shoulders, his large frame wilting and weak, flipping through channels for dad. The Big Bang Theory appears on the screen and my dad’s laugh escapes his lungs in struggled rasps— “this show is so funny, I always get a kick out of it.”

The doctor knocks quickly and my brother mutes the television. In a lengthy summary filled with medical terms and multiple options, as if he was being paid per word, the doctor

inquires about testing for severe sleep apnea as a last resort. A  
'hail mary' of sorts to save his life.

The overnight test is scheduled. The sleeping equipment  
ordered. My dad smiles. Hopelessly.

Self-storage industry leaders indicate units are needed for four primary reasons: dislocation, divorce, downsizing, and death. The bright orange brochure brags about 142 million square feet of space for sale nationwide.

I'm surrounded by boxes labeled "FRAGILE! Memories" or "FRAGILE! Pictures & picture frames".

I've sifted through every box, every closet, every cubby of this house, encountering objects linked to memories, then making the decision of what stays and what goes.

People rent storage units for their overflow, or when they're in a state of transition. \$88 a month to store your memories and enchanted objects. Night after night I've driven past rows of crowded units, some with contents bursting, spilling out on the concrete, demanding to be acknowledged. We pack our own unit to the roof trusting in Public Storage to keep it safe for us.

Half my books won't see daylight for six months. Our wedding pictures crowd each other in misshapen boxes. Dust settles on storage bins and time becomes irrelevant in that 8 foot by 10 foot space.

I stop by late one night to inhale our old sheets, eager to smell our previous home, but discover that the cheap fibers have already consumed the musty nothingness of the unit. It's a lonely smell.

\*

My mother and her brother kept a few storage units for nearly a decade, each one overflowing with wooden craft projects and military paperwork that belonged to their dad. Every time we unhooked the lock and rolled the door open, the smell of worn leather and dust enveloped us, and the fragrant sugary odor he sprayed to hide his smoking habit.

The smell of this grandpa is the only thing I remember about him. I would sit in his lap, inhaling deeply from collars of flannel, letting a busy world settle for a bit.

My mom kept him alive, contained in units that continued to emanate his scent.

5 ft  
x 8 ft  
x 10 ft

do you love the memory of my body?

another enchanted object?

I'd put the taste of my husband's skin after a shower

my grandpa's voice captured in voicemails

my insatiable thirst for \_\_\_\_\_

my green light— that receding horizon

dying daffodils & day to day calendars I can't seem to rip

diamond rings jingling with spare change

neon wigs out on holiday—teaching me how to live

love letters & sentences I've tattooed in membranes

wedding vows on napkins

voices full of honey & dirt

stained with

miles of war

the feeling I had when the Milky Way rose over me

& lit universes into being

all through my body

the long locks

of hair

I kept

for men's

groping

fingers



the long locks

of hair

I kept

for men's

groping

fingers

my uterus up on a shelf collecting dust with the sigh of my mother keeping my 80s baby clothes company

I'd rifle through drawers looking

for a spine I lost those years ago

ground to a powder

ingested & spit out with tobacco

lost & \_\_\_\_\_:

oman

may-

november

2011

herat

november

2012-

july

2013

bagram

february-

october

2014

saudi arabia

february-

may

2016

but mostly

I'd put pre-deployment you and me

encased in the back

clad in bubble wrap—

a time before you learned

to live without home

and I learned I could live

I'd pack the incessant pounding at every

love utterance:

trembling knees

moist palms

dilated pupils

that contagious shiver

so I could try them on

every friday night

over and over

over and over

hands grazing shoulders

like a slip under a dress

without you

3PM PHONE CONVERSATION WITH DAD:

DAD: your brother brought the kids over for Halloween so they could trick or treat at my house. Their costumes were pretty cute.

ME: that's cool they stopped by your house.

DAD: \*HAHAHA\* your niece must have locked my front door on her way out because I was standing on the porch smoking—

ME: like you do.

DAD: yeah, anyway— so they pack up the grandkids and get them buckled up, and just as they're driving away I realize I'm locked out of my house! I ran down my driveway, without shoes, yelling at them to come back so your brother can help me back in.

ME: did they hear you?

DAD: Oh yeah they did. Your brother hopped the fence and luckily I had left the back door open for the dogs. \*HAHAHA\* can you imagine if they hadn't heard me? She may be 3 but I'm going to give her a hard time for locking grandpa out of his house.

6PM DINNER CONVERSATION WITH DAD:

DAD: you'll never guess what \_\_\_\_\_ did the other day. \*HAHAHA\* she must have locked my front door on her way out on Halloween (they stopped by to trick or treat) because I was standing on the porch smoking and just as they're driving away I realize I'm locked out of my house! I ran down my driveway waving and hollering at them to come back \*HAHAHA\* Your brother hopped the fence and luckily I had left the back door open for the dogs.

ME: DAD— you just told me this story on the phone less than four hours ago.

DAD: I did?

ME: Yes.

DAD: gonna take away my keys next?

Last week, my dad repeated the same story to me twice within a span of four hours. He told me once on the phone, then told me every detail again over dinner— every laugh the same, his eyes lit with expression, the joy that fills your body the first time you share a memory with someone else.

After my grandpa died, my grandma's mental capacity deteriorated in brief but permanent occurrences. Now on a limited income, my aunts seized her checkbook to prevent her from giving her mortgage money away to charity again. They removed the Home Shopping Network from her speed dial and cancelled the rip-off juice diet subscription she swore by. At Christmas and on birthdays we have to mail back or cancel the checks she sends. She adjusts to life signing checks that no longer share the heading with my grandpa's name.

One night she walked miles to the grocery store alone in southern California. My aunt received a phone call from a store employee asking for someone to pick her up. She was frantic and confused, and couldn't locate her cell phone. Upon arrival, my aunt found the cell phone in my grandma's purse. They took her car keys from her the next day.

Yesterday at dinner my dad said she repeated the same story about my grandpa four times in the span of one evening

without ever acknowledging she had done it. Aunts, daughters, cousins, grandchildren there as witness. My dad remained quiet after telling us, like briefing an unrelated news story, but I could hear \_\_\_\_\_ get caught in his vocal chords.

\*

My dad peers in the short order window of our favorite greasy diner on Kent-Kangley and \_\_\_\_\_, leaning down on elbows. I watch him expel cigarette smoke in the cold night air through his wrinkled mustache. He lets a dad joke or two out. Humor is his safety net to connect with other people. My younger brother's small feet barely scuff the floor mats; my pre-teen body in the front seat is a shape trying to be another shape.

He orders more than we need:

"Do we need milkshakes? We need milkshakes," he says to them. The diner sign is always half lit and tagged with graffiti. The teenager hands him the order ticket through the window, and as ritual, he folds it & keeps it secure in his t shirt pocket behind his pack of cigarettes.

Fries and milkshakes out of mind, our only goal is to guess the number on the order ticket. Like Bingo without the prize, we shout out numbers and he replies with whimsy like our Saturday morning cartoon characters.

There is no prize. We still get to eat the contents of grease-stained bags. It's playing this game with him, sharing this time untouched by our mother that make this spontaneous junk food run worth \_\_\_\_\_. These nights with his kids heading to restaurants reminiscent of California diners of his youth [I think] make these setting Washington nights more bearable.

Here, sitting in the car with my 60 year old dad, I wonder how long it'll be before he forgets this memory.

Or when I will.

“Even the act of deliberate destruction  
is a memorial  
to the thing  
it is designed  
to destroy”

–Edward Hollis

*The Memory Palace: A Book of Lost Interiors*

MANIPULATE.

Thursday afternoon. 4pm.

The farmhouse is quiet. I beat him home from work.

I could run this time—

My pulse palpitates as I think about how quickly I  
could pack up what's mine.

The bathroom would be easy— grab the load of  
laundry from the night before. My mom could give  
me another toothbrush.

I can leave the Ross variety kitchenware, dirty in  
the sink.

The bedroom— we shared a twin and didn't sleep  
on sheets.

I could snatch clothes by the hangers—sweaters,  
bras, dresses uprooted, fainting in my arms

I'd crawl on worn knees to clear out the attic—

pupils dilated, humming in my ears, high on the  
thought of leaving.

I would need a whole day. I could take tomorrow  
off, or next Friday.

I think about stripping the framed pictures from the  
shelves

but rocks kick up the driveway  
followed by the roar of an offroad muffler.

\*

Thursday afternoon. 4pm.

The farmhouse is quiet. I beat him home from work.

My pulse palpitates as I think about how quickly I could pack up what's mine.

The bathroom would be easy— grab the load of laundry from the night before. Discard his hickorys and long johns on dirty tiles. My mom could give me another toothbrush.

I can leave the Ross variety kitchenware, dirty in the sink. [*but maybe I should wash them first?*]

The bedroom— we shared a twin and didn't sleep on sheets. We never had sheets.

At night we could hear farm mice racing back & forth

I could snatch clothes by the hangers—sweaters, bras, dresses uprooted, fainting in my arms  
A trail of socks to the car

I'd crawl on worn knees to clear out the attic—an asylum of 200 square feet

pupils dilated, humming in my ears, high on the thought of leaving.

I would need a whole day. I could take tomorrow off, or next Friday. That's what I'll do. I'll take next Friday off.

I think about stripping the framed pictures from the shelves

Cutting his body out—  
but rocks kick up the driveway  
followed by the roar of an offroad muffler.

\*

Thursday afternoon. 4pm.

The farmhouse is quiet. I beat him home from work.

My pulse palpitates as I think about how quickly I could pack up what's mine.

The bathroom would be easy— grab the load of laundry from the night before. Discard his hickorys and long johns on dirty tiles. My mom could give me another toothbrush.

I can leave the Ross variety kitchenware, dirty in the sink.

An army of beer cans crowd the stove, drained & defeated.

Mental notes I collected detail what movies are his & what are mine; what furniture is his & what is mine; what memories are his & what are mine.

The bedroom— we shared a twin and didn't sleep on sheets. We never had sheets.

At night we could hear farm mice racing back & forth while he was inside of me

I could snatch clothes by the hangers—sweaters, bras, dresses uprooted, fainting in my arms  
A trail of socks to the car

I'd crawl on worn knees to clear out the attic—an asylum of 200 square feet  
books stacked collecting webbing and rodent droppings

pupils dilated, humming in my ears, high on the thought of leaving.

I would need a whole day. I'll take next Friday off.  
Would I need help? Can I ask for help?

I think about stripping the framed pictures from the shelves  
Cutting his body out—[*can I ever cut his body out?*]  
but rocks kick up the driveway  
followed by the roar of an offroad muffler.

\*

Thursday afternoon. 4pm.

The farmhouse is quiet. I beat him home from work again.

My pulse palpitates as I think about how quickly I could pack up what's mine.

The bathroom would be easy— grab the load of laundry from the night before. Discard his hickorys and long johns on dirty tiles. Sweep makeup and tampons and razors into safeway bags. My mom could give me another toothbrush.

I can leave the Ross variety kitchenware, dirty in the sink.

An army of beer cans crowd the stove, drained & defeated, from last Friday. Flies circle the used tinfoil & tongs left to rot. Steaks marinating in the fridge next to my coffee creamer are waiting for their Friday night debut. Empty glass bottles clink a celebration in the recycling bin.

In the living room mental notes I collected detail what movies are his & what are mine; what furniture is his & what is mine; what memories are his & what are mine. The loveseat can stay; the smell of jim beam breeds in its fibers.

The bedroom— we shared a twin and didn't sleep on sheets. We never had sheets.

At night we could hear farm mice racing back & forth while he was inside of me  
as I watched the digital clock blink

I could snatch clothes by the hangers—sweaters, bras, dresses uprooted, fainting in my arms

A trail of socks to the car

*[maybe I'd leave the wardrobe & start over?]*

I'd crawl on bruised hands & worn knees to clear out the attic—an asylum of 200 square feet  
books stacked collecting webbing and rodent droppings

pupils dilated, humming in my ears, high on the thought of leaving. Of finally leaving.

I would need a whole day.

but  
maybe I could stay—  
maybe I should stay—

I think about stripping the framed pictures from the  
shelves

Cutting his body out—[*can I ever cut his body  
out?*]

but rocks kick up the driveway  
followed by the roar of an offroad muffler.

\*

Thursday afternoon. 4pm.

The farmhouse is quiet. I beat him home from work again.

My pulse palpitates as I think about how quickly I could pack up what's left of mine.

The bathroom would be easy— grab the load of laundry from the night before. Discard his hickorys and long johns on dirty tiles. Sweep makeup and tampons and razors into safeway bags. My mom would give me another toothbrush.

I can leave the Ross variety kitchenware, dirty in the sink, keeping the broken mason jars company. An army of beer cans crowd the stove, drained & defeated, from another Friday. Flies circle the used tinfoil & tongs left to rot. A steak marinates in the fridge next to my coffee creamer waiting for its Friday night debut. Empty glass bottles clink a celebration in the recycling bin.

In the living room—  
the loveseat can stay; the smell of jim beam breeds in its fibers.  
He'll burn the bookshelf. A sacrificial offering for his weekly bonfire.

The bedroom— we shared a twin and didn't sleep on sheets. We never had sheets.  
At night we could hear farm mice racing back & forth while he was inside of me  
chew & liquor on his tongue  
a glass of jim beam sweats on the nightstand  
as I watched the digital clock blink & blink & blink  
another night of using my body as a lure, trading sex for sobriety

I could snatch clothes by the hangers—sweaters, bras, dresses uprooted, fainting in my arms  
A trail of socks to the car  
*[maybe I'd leave the wardrobe & start over?]*

I'd crawl on bruised hands & worn knees to clear out the attic—

books stacked collecting webbing and rodent  
droppings

pupils dilated, humming in my ears, high on the  
thought of leaving. Of finally leaving.

I would need a whole day.

I think about stripping the framed pictures from the  
shelves

Cutting his body out—[*can I ever cut his body out?*

*Can his body ever not be a part of my body?*]

but rocks kick up the driveway

followed by the roar of an offroad muffler.

\*

Thursday afternoon. 4pm.

The farmhouse is quiet.

My pulse palpitates as I quickly pack up what's mine.

The bathroom was easy— grabbed the load of laundry from the night before. Discarded hickorys and long johns on dirty tiles. Swept makeup and tampons and razors into safeway bags.

I left the Ross variety kitchenware, dirty in the sink. An army of beer cans crowd the stove, drained & defeated, from the last Friday.

In the living room—  
the loveseat stayed. the couch stayed. the bookcase stayed.

The bedroom—  
I snatched clothes by the hangers—sweaters, bras, dresses uprooted, fainting in my arms  
A trail of socks to the car  
the trunk an open mouth- ready for more

I crawled on hands & knees to clear out the attic—  
freed books from webbing and rodent droppings

pupils dilated, humming in my ears, high on the act of leaving. Of finally leaving.

I needed a whole day off. I took a whole day off.

I stripped the framed pictures from the shelves  
cutting his body out  
before rocks ever kick up the driveway.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, Greek general Ptolemy I Soter ordered the construction of the Library of Alexandria, one of the first of its kind in scale and scope, to begin the process of documenting and cataloging events, cultural beliefs, political movements, weather patterns—everything. Memory finally had a place to live outside the body with a renewed hope of being carried on to future generations eager for knowledge. However, less than fifty years passed before the library was lost in a fire at the hands of Caesar.

What secrets did those ashes obliterate? What traditional rituals, mapped out on papyrus sheets, were lost to the flames lit by war?

Furthermore, a space was deemed necessary to collect and protect cultural objects of significance. Communities were becoming civilizations, populations shot up, and artifacts were easily lost. Museums were born to hold onto history. Now, every major city has dedicated spaces, some with a dozen or more buildings, to preserve as we continue to create.

Spaces were established, rooms dedicated to the rumination of memory. Places for people to gather and sit in a particular space and time.

A space of recall and witness.

*Are you feeling entitled to my memories yet?*

There is a phenomena that occurs when you tell a memory to someone for the first time. As the neurons fire through your brain, language sputters out of you in droves as the recollection of the memory feeds quotes and settings and faces into your cortex. The smell of fresh cut peonies; the distant murmur of a commuter ferry; the exact grip and warmth of your lover's fingers braided with yours. You live in the sensations all over again it seems.

Hands flying, moments mimicked, eyes widen, a laugh rolling over words, or perhaps something gets caught on the way up... your eyes drift to the left, a process of summoning, letting the thrill of memory possess your body.

The novelty of a new memory can be seen in widening pupils, excited by the prospect of sharing new knowledge. A moment in your life that proves to someone you are living.

“These are the things that have happened to me since I last saw you...”

“Are we all caught up?”

You perform the memory to the best of your ability, improvising lines and expressions. One misstep will ruin the delivery, so the recollection has to be flawless.

What's the role of the person hearing a memory for the second time? Are you the one responsible for telling them you've heard this story before? You interrupt them mid-sentence,

watch their face fall as you witness them think about if and when they've told you this story before. Or do you perform memory with them? Act surprised by the minute details, laugh when they laugh, rise when they rise, fill in gaps they may have forgotten.

\*

FALSIFY.

I finally hit CALL and the phone rings.

“I’m so sorry to hear about grandpa.”

“Yes, well...”

My grandma’s voice is high and merciful, balancing between decades’ practice of poise and whimsy. Her short sentences prevent me from hearing the hurt she’s working hard to bury. The undercurrent of her sentences, like a riptide, threatens to pull down the polished, melodic cadence of her voice.

“I loved him so much, too. Please let me know if I can do anything for you.”

“Thank you for calling.”

"I already told you about that?"

My husband sits patiently as I tell him a story he's already heard. He pokes fun, gives me a stage for my repeat productions, nodding and smiling like it's the first time.

When a significant moment occurs, I defy Plato and decide to write it down. Every detail I can still recall. I have pages of memories buried in journals around my home. The act of witnessing and experiencing, with its burdens and limitations, its revelations and exaltations, is a resistance to forgetting.

I imagine the inside of my head is lined with brightly colored sticky notes, my messy handwriting scrawled on each, with every milestone, every conversation, every glimmer of light in my life, recorded. Every note is stamped with a date and time. I do it as an act of reminding, knowing someday I may not remember on my own.

Think of living

in this small space

by mistake or on

purpose

deep

invisible tracks they must leave

behind —

Catharsis: [ca.thar.sis] noun

1. A purge
  2. A purification
  3. elimination of a complex by bringing it to consciousness and affording it expression
- [M.W.]

A Poetic Statement

Nicole McCarthy

I spent weekends of my childhood locked away with books. I loved language in a way I knew I couldn't love another human being. I could love without a safety net. I could love it selfishly, hungrily, without caution or expiration. It showed itself to me in endless variations through every book I finished.

Writing is the only way I know how to exist in the world. During the final year of my undergrad, I fell in love. With Juliana Spahr. With Harryette Mullen. With Matthea Harvey. I had been living within the rules of genre and the traditions of form for so long that I feared repercussions for the desire I felt for hybrid works. I gave in when I got a taste of erasures.

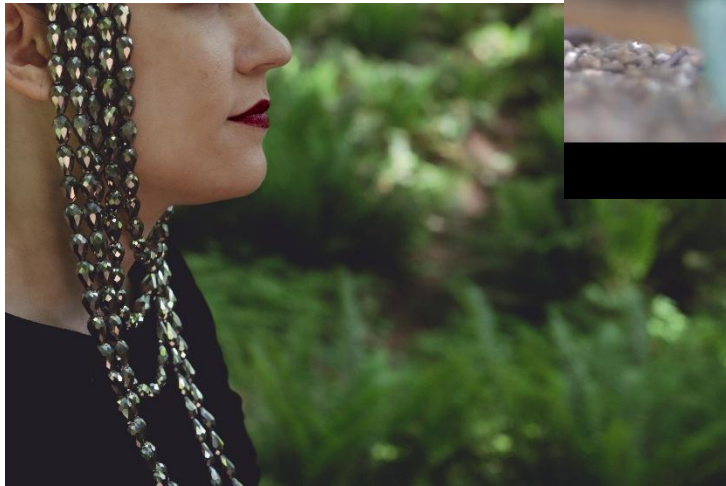
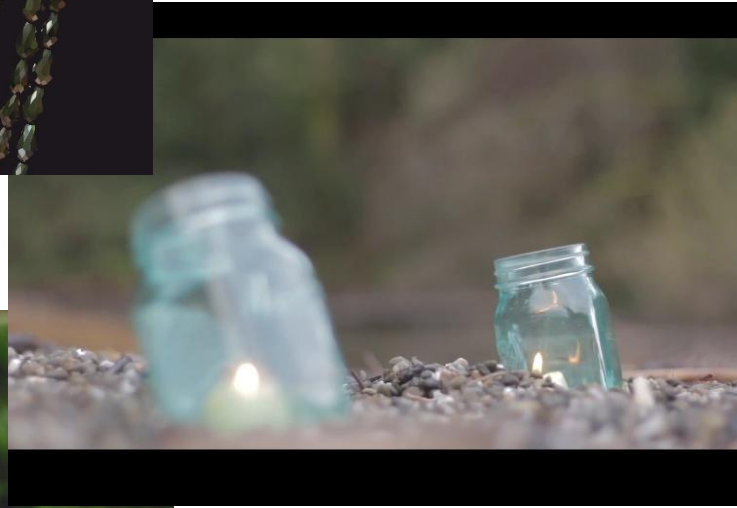
I spent the summer before I officially started the book with stacks of research books and journals full of free writes. I had just started working with Renee, still timid when matched with her intensity, so I put off sharing my meandering prose.

I began designing short scientific and historical briefs, like essays, to build a foundation for the book. I knew I needed to teach the reader about how memory works in the body and its significance over time so they could understand what I was attempting with the memory experiments. They had to know the process of memory consolidation; how the brain ages; what gaslighting was and why it happened; to understand how malleable our memory is so they could see what I was doing with my own recollection process. The reader would feel the weight—feel the risk—of what was occurring on each page.

I layered in poetic meditations to reflect on the different themes happening in my life: moving out of a house full of memories; an aging grandmother with Alzheimer's and a dad in the early stages of memory loss; years of domestic abuse exhumed for all to read. While the briefs became the foundation, the meditations became the walls of the book, creating rooms of space for rumination. I wanted to create living spaces for readers to enter and inhabit [briefly or for a longer period of time] before fluidly moving on to the next place. The meditations gave me the allowance to explore

feelings I thought I had could manage or had already dealt with.

The visual pieces and the memory experiments lie at the heart of the book—they are the mantle above the fireplace holding objects of significance. They are the stories I never wanted to tell, never wanted to admit to myself, but had to in order to override them. They couldn't exist [sometimes] just through text; they needed to move on the page—be struck out—meander around a storage unit—explode through a blueprint. Traumatic memories, when recalled, often only appear in a visual form as the heightened sensitivity of the brain during incidents of stress capture small sensory details. These moments couldn't be contained by text.



The video introduction I created for the book is the process of summoning. I channel the Greek goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, as I ask for assistance in rewriting or planting memories that I need to move past my current stasis point. Performing this ritual down on a Washington beach was a moment of catharsis I didn't know I was seeking. The resulting video elevates the book above a mere reading experience and shows how this body of work needs to come alive in a variety of mediums.

\*

Performance: [per.for.mance] noun

1. the execution or accomplishment of work, acts, feat
- ~~2. the fulfillment of a claim, promise, or request~~
  - a. *my state of being or becoming*
3. an action or proceeding of an unusual or spectacular kind
  - a. *a summoning*

[M.W. & Dictionary]

What can I submit my body to?

What will happen to my body in front of an audience, through the process of catharsis?

How will my body change through the performance of this text? Or will it?

How can I make my reader feel this performance in their body?

How long will I live inside these questions? How many answers will I continue to find in the dark spaces of possibility as time progresses? As my work evolves?

The performance of this book is one of healing. Each page a new offering. A calling. An invitation to the reader, and to myself, to purge and release.

I read “Thursday afternoon” last November for a packed coffeehouse. I sped up gradually with every repetition, every day lived over and over again on the page with only the most subtle of changes, and by the fourth iteration I could feel the room shift. Every cell phone was down, every eye cast on me, watching and waiting. My words held power as the audience recognized the sacrifice I offered them. A sacrifice I will continue to offer.

“Chatter” is a textual performance on the page. Each memory overlaps another, merging into each other, finding their space to communicate. Some text becomes obscured and difficult to read, leaving the moment savored only by the narrator. At an MFA salon in January, I singled out these moments, cut them up, and handed them out to members of my cohort to read with me. One voice blended into another, one by one, building and becoming a blur of memory. Only I knew every moment being uttered as the room full of professors and friends swarmed with a language fighting for attention. Fighting for space.

My body of work changes depending on the medium in which they pieces are performed—through video, on the page, out loud to an audience, or to myself.

\*

Risk: [risk] noun

1. possibility of loss or injury
2. the hazard or chance of loss  
*[loss/humiliation/anger/excitement/disappointment/calm/  
joy/shame]*
3. to venture upon; take or run the chance of

I sat across from Rebecca Brown, discussing my eagerness to start my first book during the first quarter of my MFA, but she shook her head. “Give yourself time to play this year. Find out how you like to write. Go from there.” This small permission gave me room to explore the boundaries of every question I asked and every notion of genre I fought back against. It gave me liberty to fail beautifully and start again with renewed, focused vigor.

\*

change  
Ginger  
with love to much

I washed Jupiter's mouse glimmer faintly through the telescope you asked if my hands were warm enough to write yet, I nodded, the globe was crisscrossing constellations with a haze that seemed to penetrate the darkness of our universe; I turned to you and whispered: don't you feel cosmically insignificant? Isn't it a beautiful feeling?

I washed Jupiter's mouse glimmer faintly through the telescope you asked if my hands were warm enough to write yet, I nodded, the globe was crisscrossing constellations with a haze that seemed to penetrate the darkness of our universe; I turned to you and whispered: don't you feel cosmically insignificant? Isn't it a beautiful feeling?

Don't have this being first  
\$ DON'T CENTER IT!  
START OFF CENTER

My husband is home  
Coming back from a particular deployment overseas, husband squeezed in next to me in the booth real close, I smell he was wearing his familiar cologne again. We'd away to the ocean to a small inn we loved, one we returned to after every deployment. It felt like the connective tissue we needed to bridge the intimacy we shared before he left and the strange familiarity we now experience when you know someone so well but haven't touched or interacted in an extended period of time. My cheeks flushed when our arms grazed each other—eyes met, locked in a longing we had been trying to define for years.

I washed through photos on my phone, showing him what he missed while he was away. I didn't need to show him (he knew already) but every time he insisted, I think, because the pain of not being present helped him be even more present when he was home. During the summer of 2014 I had hair that stretched down toward my navel and I was desperate to cut it off. I sent him pictures of short bobs that I'd been obsessing over, dreaming of summers without drizzled hair wrapping around my neck. He replied: "Please don't cut your hair at least until I come home."

At the time I was annoyed, why should I have to wait? What difference could it make? But to him it was and change. He left with the memory of me with hair he'd comb fingers through in the winter before

think about  
memory  
METAPHOR  
PARADE  
MOMENT  
QUOTE  
\*I had  
hair that  
stretched  
down  
toward  
my navel

This moment  
in the cafe!  
what he was  
away?  
the hair?  
returning to get  
metaphor missing

moving through  
to get to near him

Systems of the body:

1. Integumentary: skin, hair, & nails. Outer covering.
2. Muscular: layers of muscles over bone, extends over joints. Contracts & relaxes and produces movement.
3. Skeletal: bones & connective tissue; supports body; protects internal parts.
4. Circulatory: consists of heart & network of vessels; supplies oxygen & nutrients to body; also removes waste product.
5. Nervous: body's main control system. Consists of brain, spinal cord & network of nerves that extend whole body.
6. Lymphatic: network of vessels that collect fluids from tissues & returns to the blood; contains groups of cells that protect against infection. (massage passages)
7. Respiratory: centered on the lungs; bringing oxygen to the blood; aids the body of carbon dioxide waste.
8. Endocrine: many growth and energy production, directed by hormones. These chemicals are released by the glands of the endocrine system.
9. Digestive: breaks down food into units called nutrients & absorbs them into the blood.
10. Urinary: filters waste; excretes from body.
11. Reproductive: produces sperm & eggs; needed for procreation; male/female.

Can I make  
a visual memory  
body poem?

THE TRAUMA  
OF WHISKEY  
IN PROCESS  
2/17/17

FAISIFY

My dad growing up was holier-than-his voice boomed from his chest, a thunder all his own that I knew all my life.

In my early 20s, we chased an enigmatic diagnosis that left my dad uncomfortably overweight, lacking sleep, and without a speaking voice for over a year. At restaurants, the waiters had to lean in to hear his order over quiet dinner chatter. His laughter existed only in a rasp and a smile, stretching smile. He couldn't talk to us on the phone anymore. I had resigned my body to think I would never hear his voice again.

Towards the end, the will to care vacated his body: he stood outside on his porch, smoke escaping his lips, as he whispered to his children. Seeing his warm breath hit the cold night air was the only indication to me that he was still alive.

My aunt flew up from California to help clean his home and say goodbye to him. He was out of doctors. He was out of work. He was out of money.

My dad lay in a hospital bed, out of breath, his voice stolen by illness. The teal hospital gown looked foreign on his large body. The hospital room was barren apart from the TV and mic anxiety inducing medical equipment. He missed his

more  
these  
precise  
dust from  
previous  
RG: something  
NA being talked  
start here  
FIXED

voice stolen here is important

BAUUN  
does it  
NIGHTER

SPENT PAGE

THE TERMS OF WHISKEY: -GRACE OF -DISRUPTION

INTEGUMENTARY: prick at my eyelids until they bleed & sweat  
I pick to prepare as I consume uncertainty. I chew on broken nails to prevent me from speaking. The hair on my arms prick & sway; crescent-shaped depressions in my palms made the shape of my body.

CIRCULATORY: palpitations bounced to an irregular beat through a stethoscope; the doctor's question lingered in her furrowed brow: "what stresses exist in your daily life?" excess

MUSCULAR: shoulders slump & muscles contract—Tendons tense & flex; reactive. My knuckles know the memory of curling into a pillow; the balance needed to demonstrate pleasure vs. fear.

DIGESTIVE: on Friday nights you & I were to dinner in the small back town we lived in. We'd meet your friends there & bar down the hall & around the corner. You'd go knowing I couldn't follow. Aged-beer-they-green-eyed slow trained to taste of Friday nights. I crushed turns between teeth to balance the fitters. The taste on my tongue was metallic.

ENDOCRINE: My menstrual blood set you off, knowing it besotted me, replenishing the power to my uterus, a natural repellent to your gasp of "country boy"

I'd let it run wild between thick thighs, savor in the space it created apart from you.

But I lived & breathed by the ten commandments of you because you told me to. If you'd raised your hand high, to shake on condensation, ruling transmutation a sin I would have plucked it up & prayed god to take the power from my endearing ovaries.

New  
REV  
AS OF  
APRIL  
17

RG:  
Need to  
feel  
presence.  
Activate those  
tears more  
Can't wait  
of approaching

at 5/13

Renee:

“What’s at stake?”

“This might be the layer you're most comfortable writing on, but I do think you'll get more energy and depth if you show more, open up some of these secrets. You're methodical, which is good, but I want to feel emotionally why we are in this space of memory and what you are pursuing through the vision of the book.”

“Be in the body, not just in the brain.”

“I’m looking for a rawness that’s missing. You need to go deeper than what you have here.”

\*

I don’t know how to be vulnerable comfortably.

I’ve been called ‘insensitive’ more times than I care to remember.

But writing has always been my conduit to emotion. To empathy. Toward a potential dialogue, even if only one-sided. When I felt I had failed in person, writing it all out, giving me the time to assemble the right sentences, helped me bridge a gap I knew I suffered from.

This book is both personal and universal. Everyone learns how to be a human being in different ways. Especially from witnessing and experiencing it with others. This collection offers a glimpse, albeit a brief and limited one, of how one person is performing as human.

This was the first time I admitted to the trauma of my past. The first time people would know about the abuse.

To open myself up for future works, I needed this first book to turn me inside out; to address the moments I had gone too long not addressing. I need to start building trust because my reader and I have an intimate relationship, one that needs to be fostered and rooted in honesty and vulnerability. Every project from this point forward will be a conversation with my reader; an exchange; a touch.

Every word and every sentence for me is a moment to open up my body to the reader. I want my body to fill a blank page, and others to be asking for it. Does that count as a risk?

\*

Draft. Revise.

Draft. Revise.

Draft. Revise.

I've treated memory as materiality, diving into different moments of place and time, peeling back on conversations and sifting through words once said. I recollected moments I wanted no one experience; wrote them down, over and over, to begin the experimentation. I tampered with memory to change them. Every time I re-read these passages, every time I utter these words to an audience, the memory goes back into my body slightly different. After years of reading and rereading and circulating this book, perhaps the moments will be irreversibly altered.

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