

Near Before and After

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Abstract

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How can you live in the present when the present is dead? Often travel writing centers itself around the belief that positioning yourself in foreign atmospheres is the disconnect necessary to connect—connect with the environment, with others, with the self. Traveling does unlock another tempo of living, but it is an escape from the present into transient time and space. I have been preoccupied with this living and writing *in media res*. Nothing holds. Everything bleeds. In an attempt to capture this ephemerality I used a projector to throw my poems across darkened landscapes and roadways, waiting for the others also traveling through these limbo places, to step into the beams and render my work. The final product is *Near Before and After*, a collection of long form, concrete, and visual poetry that questions what it means to leave and return, and replies with a text that pushes forwards, while not necessarily moving onwards.

Near Before and After

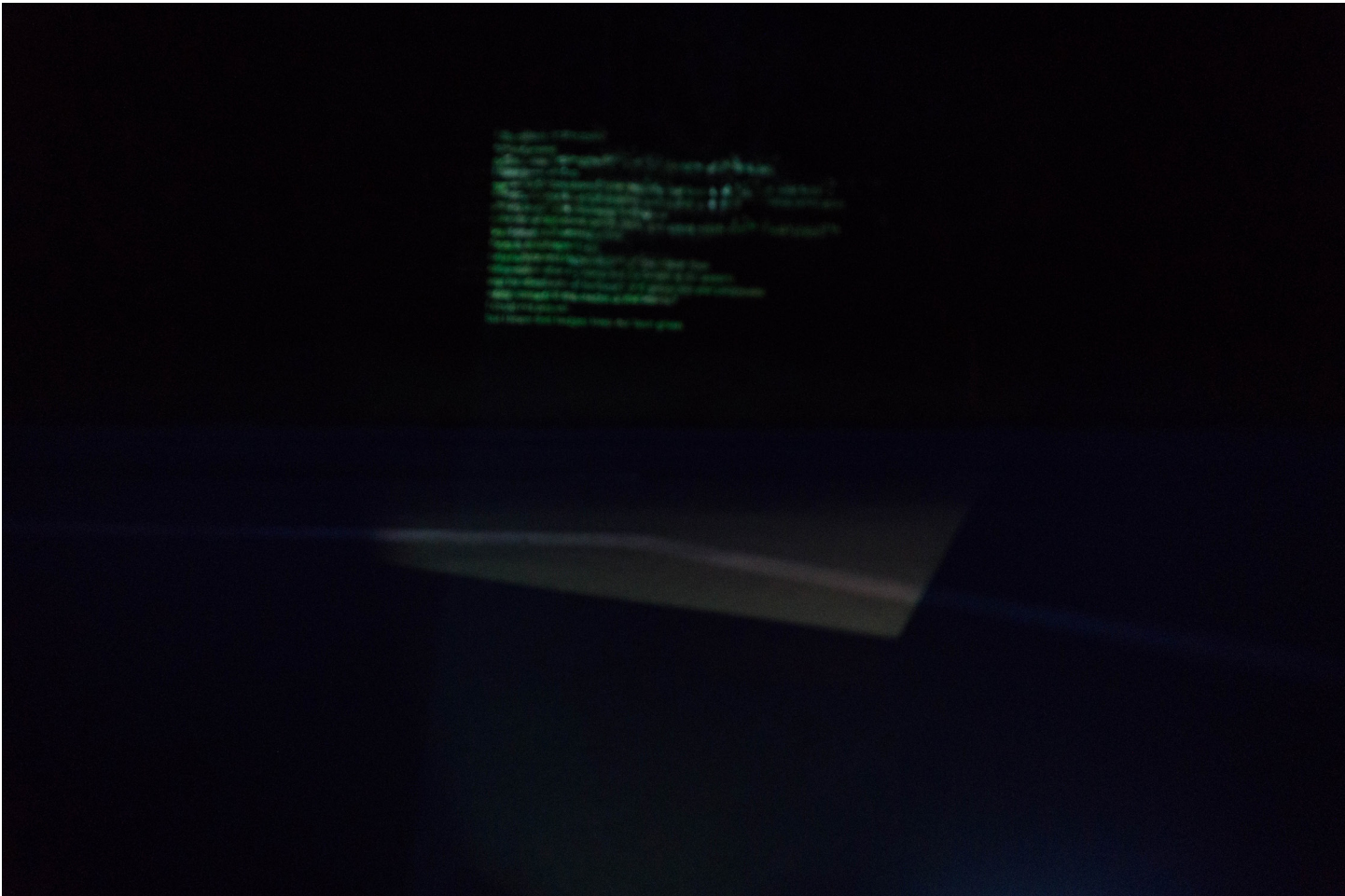
Katelyn Opegard

Things before me:

my mother
our birth
peppermint bark
chickens
and eggs
the electric
pterodactyls
foundings
or losses
steam
herds
the sum of our parts
fever
granite
the beginning
Tucson
all acts of leaving
the seasons
bellies
invention of wings
gold teeth
growing through
digital warrens
the high-five
blue
the return
home runs
wheels
flames
the economy
history
and history books
the word

Things before me:

your feet
our hands
doorways
leeways
takeaways
movie theater popcorn
a head
lights
a horse
not the cart
the inevitable
keyboards
eggs
vistas
void
vacuum bags
circling pencils
these lenses
god
receding gums
four dogeared corners
baseball season
100,000
the big dipper
the little spoon
sleep
dreams
unrest
the uphill
pondersoa pines
spilt salt circles
Icarus
the wheel



In the dark I reach for your head
but can not find your ears
palms about your face
fingers brushing abject space
outer
 rimmed
 ringed
your brow is nebulous
a limb framed halo of
eyes
that I see but can't look for seasickness
but isn't it a law of physics that two objects can't occupy the
same space
at the same time

so how are we this one body
each extremity becoming mine
they call it a give and take
an ebb and flow
it feels like a wrenching
the more leverage the looser the bolts
when cruxes crack
until tires spin out

Polyphemus is famous for having only one eye
then no eye
but even he had ears
and Tiresias was blind but he could hear
the dismissal of his council
so what hero are we
or martyr
or villain
it changes every town
and every night
the moon our cartographer
tells me how to move
she knows that tidal rhythm by heart

so I push my fists through where your ears have been
and pull your head up
before me
your brain on a spit
I can feel your secrets
I hide them under my fingernails
sometimes they look like dirt
black crescents
I'd never pick loose
but I could stow them in my belly button
plant them like redwood seedlings
swaddle them in lint
water them with positive ions because
I'm an optimist
watch them grow beyond my toes
a sapling
a darling
toppling me headfirst
maybe I'll fell them to build a pyre
or a sloop
the mast piercing sheets
raised to sail
unmoored except for this
pillow
all boards
 planks
 gainways
and legs that feel at home in the rocking

I've found your ears
they were in my pockets
one in the breast
the left in my false bottom boot
I'm sorry for flattening it
but each step was a reverence
could you hear it
I whisper into that pancake
"I'll keep watch while you sleep"

hours

that mirror where both
our heads fit in frame
my reflection speaks
tell me what you want
it answers
I want to give you endless pages and scrolls and leaflets and post-its
an arrangement of the alphabet
letters that have caused me to weep
like in this mirror

is it your face
maybe this you is earless
maybe I am too
the smooth sides of my head hidden by hair and hats and my hands stopping up holes with palms I've given
to you
too late
and everything is louder now
it is the quiet
we don't breathe here
in space
 in dusk
 on dawns
have I ever spoken before

I lick my elbow to check I still have a tongue
if needed I'll steal yours
suck past sticking
it is a forgiving muscle
never noticing I'd misplaced those ears
but it's never been one for synesthesia
all taste
 all touch
 all time
makes me wonder
how do you hold a storm cloud between lips
lightning is a burst of timing
weather is opportunity therefore
blizzards are a gift
thank you

underneath the sea and
amid sleep
I understand inescapable
I've been swallowed
to a fullness
my bleaching
is a leeching
willingly I've walked from maw to maw
beyond throats towards the heart of the matter
reflectors in the cavity double its size
a shiny hall of mirrors I learn
teeth are stronger than bones
could I crunch a femur with my incisor
I try
digging graves with tombstones
remember me
 remember me
 dismember me
 member me
 embers
 and
 bedchambers

my knees agree
clicking open and closed
purple is the most natural color
so bury me in lilac and violet
lavender orchid iris heather
grape boysenberry jam raisin wine
eggplant sangria
in flowers and fruit
ring my eyes and imprint my thighs
please dye my lips
plum
stain me from the neck out and
wring me of all juices into a skein of plovers

what is it to be withered
warped like twisted vine
entwined wrists and
buckled spines
knuckle my lungs for signs of life
breathe me to eden
to that wizened and wise bark so I may bite
and know
why your nose grows as you sigh into my ribs
the meat there is tender and pink
never having crewed this body to much heaving
save now

as the canary cage hoists the sheets and makes sails
on this two man wreck
the only anchor for my soles
is the tufted mattress
rocking waves
adrift I am lost
to be lost is to be loved
the big dipper points to Polaris
about your chest
crawling up your left side
a constellation I can read by fingertips
a fleshy braille not taught
in life as in sleep
how many have imagined this same
twist of cheek or drag of chin
gravel sounds best when backed over
by steamrollers
melted once into a smooth highway
countless wheels revolving across that asphalt we've laid
how lucky for them to cruise
so unencumbered
how unlucky for them to speed through dark

In that
dirt I appeal to the crops
themselves corn gets stuck in my teeth
wheat and feet and ears all since terrestrial and mine
except I was born a steward and know nothing beneath the
earth how deep do roots stretch my fingers dig only inches and beg
for the spark of the divine in these weeds I want to bend at my own will how
do you snap your own spine?
turning my back by
by vertebrae
like
I'll try to soften it in the sun
the hour following ray
until I am shaped
an oval

asked if I believe in crop
circles I'll answer yes I pray to who? to
aliens extraterrestrials beyond terrestrials above
terrestrials I'll change our name to terrestrials beings more than
more than being things of the incomprehensible like love like clocks like
sleep in dreams we merge appear a flesh our becoming this chicken and egg
universe the answer is in the
leaves that bending this
heard through
thrown

phrasing read et al in the stalks and
breaking my weekly genesis
each cheek stroked by
stones

But
on Tuesdays I'd press my
palms to man of terrestrial from terrestrial
against terrestrial and in feeling my own life lines and
love lines and death creases I find jealousy and shut my eyes
that have such scope but less depth to flicker between brothers becoming
Cain slain Abel and in moments I shove my hands in the
otherworldly and banish myself
out into the dark to
dirt and ask



Welcome to this fifth space
the anterior of where want meets need
in law relation
ask why is my mother
fog or mist
airy murky mornings
what do we mean when we call it a watery sun
is it a dousing
 soaking
 smoking
 ember
 enflamed once and
 embalmed
 smudged behind
 brick wall back
 drops across rusty
 belt buckled hulls

I mean look at the banks
rivets and rivulets and rivers of
ribbets
a plaque upon all our houses
causes us to sell the farm and return to the wild
it is here that we find
hominy and homily and humidity
these three homey

we must protect it
circle the wagons and nurse
to stew and sour
cuddle and curdle like most field-guides say you should
to maximize growth
we must cultivate it
pluck the strings
strum the weeds
furlough the plots and points of view to make way for the
few and the lesser
we must be stewards
ships adrift
stars adroit
swords true towards dripping nostrils
bless you but I am already ill

have I lost you
I've been turned around myself
my back showcased to face the jury
where we ask
who are you
we've met before and will again
I'm sure
footed only uphill in worn toeholds
following the steps of the
cast out and away
demons from bodies
sin from hearts
the chosen from homelands
there is no delineation between evil and good
especially in these analogies where
counterpart : counterpoint :: birth : orphan
where snakes are grown from the short end of the staff

whose sternum do I belong to
a bar broken free from the cage setting the canary loose upon the mines
calling out
crying over
crowing open
I can never catch him
because I set him free
and you cannot rescind pleasure or wings
you can only salt
the earth
the sea
every surface of the world
is a hand
sometimes it's mine
when I flex my fingers I feel rivers swell and streetlamps lining suburb sidewalks warm
to a glow
now it's time for the others to go home
dragging their baseball bats and their feet
up the walkway into the kitchen
I press my nose against the pane
and watch as they eat and eat and eat
and never in their hunger are they cast out
filling plates and stomachs to headlines

all houses are the same
roofs upon walls
and rooms to sit in and stare about
I'll tell you what happens when you crack doorjambs and
window frames and foundations themselves

nothing

everything

somethings

sometimes

it depends

I'm no expert but I have seen it all and the sum
seeing is believing in some dimensions
that's faith
trusting eyes you were merely born with
experience trumps knowledge
in the sense that I love you but I must hibernate
this makes it a choice and that's what
Americapoetrydenial is about

I am in the wind
and see the currents in the sea swirl the fish like a spoon stirring life as in death
here we are all and none but regardless we are dust blown
my size has shrunk
the heat has shriveled my skin and wrung me dry
so that I may soak up
in
to drenching
all that will be divinely offered to me
that is a promise etched in refractions and prisms
a funhouse I lose myself in
and become surrounded by versions of me
not only temporal specters
but the birth of my personal mythos
archetypal self
a sufficient being where I wear all the hats
stacked one on top of the other
a tower of bowlers and fezzes and pillboxes
all brimless yet I am brimming
with an unsourceable buzzing
this well runs deep
all the way through the earth pulling water from the seas
and I drink it all
unquenchable
unquestioned
queuing cup after cup
draining the holy grail of all its figures
gluttony is only a sin if you are ashamed



The speed of light is equal to the reflex of my index
flicking a switch on an inner wall
and suddenly we are bathed in bright yellow
the heart of the sun in our kitchen our hallway our mouths
floating in mid space of equilibrium
all the pores of our bodies cast in deep shadow as we start to sink into the glow
throwing ourselves in every direction
light is liquid
filling the shape of the container to capacity
molding to corners and bending over backwards
even in shadow there is relief
we will fill the world the way this lamp saturates the living room

the electricity bill comes electrically now
assume I've built the meter
but these calluses are not from working palms
nailed
or bruise burned with
solder pens
but I feel it like potholes
our A frame morphing into a lean-to
how much for a lintel
that felled beam
from this stranger's family
I watch you watch
slow rot from the foundation
cancer in the bones
falling out of anything usually happens when sleeping
and you'll feel better after

nausea
like shedding ellipses
shedding shame
all skin
sloughed off like a reptile
I am a gecko
eyes too big for lids
so I remove them
dinner plates
full of milk
and
honeybees
that's what I love like
a polination

there's hyacinth in you
and in the summer radishes
it's of turtles
before hatching
in stained-glass shells
born with a yolky underbelly
wait bearing membrane
like lambs
shearing
 thinning
 stretching
 weaving
warming
into these sheets
clinging to bellies
this flock
crows
blotting out
soaking up
the roofs the skies all eyes

since when do birds leave their nests
in woods down far
in floating milk
 up with the crack of a whip
 spilling under
candlewick feathers lit by the rise of moon ahead
but that's never what it's about

I'm asking after the ways in which all birds verge
 towards magnetic veins and heartbeats ever since
excepting
always—maybe —throughout
I can't unsee those days birthed via buoyant eyes
 those days that grew tall as the promise within
 babies' bones
 the importance in the during
between when the bottom caved in
and the sides sprung off
and the tops sputtered out

I am reborn on the rocks
among waves
and feel the sucking in the east
I have been placed
and with my time spun those fine lines and built a silky web of laser
beams
that spanned from shoal to gyre
uniting the terrible in a heifer's head

until the devil met me on my rocks and asked which shade of
salt I prayed to
and I could not answer
there is no choice
only skillets and fillets
enflamed
and he asked
which came first the cracks or the wedge
I could not answer
but I knew that hedges keep our lawn green
sometimes when others pass under the navel of static space
I envy
even when I'm chosen I bite and debone
and when not I hug too tightly knowing that an embrace
requires more arms
it is the straight that keeps me narrow
it is the straight that keeps Me
a digit on a draw by number
a bolt in the horse's bit
one anchor to a constellation of ten million tons
I've asked after my name but its breath is my sister's
so the devil asks of bedposts and gateposts and lampposts
and I answer it is between ourselves

Let's
categorize of sorts
like with like no opposites
attraction out liars here on earth
I hear the morning it is yolky it is fetal
it is wide it's expected father will wake us
but it is the sun and I never want to leave
this bed that I made myself with cotton and
nails hewn and sewn because here stop means
yes and that's not a sex thing but indecision
breeds opportunity endless like rabbits like
blackholes a coma is my cosmology and
if perchance I dream through my
breakfast I will wake with all
new scales

By
lunchtime I've
forgotten where I've placed
yesterday I had it just yesterday in
my cupped fists both an offering and
an asking schrödinger's hands purgatorial
palms how many ways can I name the ends
of my arms? Let's count until we run out of
fingers although I hear there are more than
grains of sand on the beach a shore of clipped
fingernails little crescent moons fallen to
earth shorn from space to fill my pail
to then upturn my own personal
kingdom come

You are
either living or dead there is
no both I've been told tomorrow I
will learn to say yes in the future I will
come home in the future I will return the
past like an overdue library book there will be
a fine I will ask ghosts for change spare a nickel
knuckle for knuckle against sainted gates and
perennial spring is anyone home give me the
green light to breathe below accordion ribs
pitched in fields of easy tall grass where
I'll watch the stars all dead all alive
identical polars



Who tied me to this mast
and made wicks of
my eyelashes
soon I will see through tempered steel
a cutlass gaze
that refracts within and tears
wires loose
I was a circuitboard
we were all motherboarded
all gargled beeps and
 gummed diodes
can't you hear it
the gulls the whistles
like microwave popcorn
who remembers when we sailed from
those rocks that looked like open palms
no thank you no thanks
I'd always rather walk
the plank

could someone loosen these knots

justified

Justice I'd

like to say one more thing

even as one always loses their voice

we are a forgetful people

but I've been held hostage

by my own crew

and that I do remember

so I find myself canned

and preserved

jellied

held over a flame

a kindness and a trespass

I've committed an unknowable crime

and depending who you ask I am either sorry or

spread open

just look at my wingspan

does it appear to be a mistake

take me flight

rush the fleas

finally an altitude that I can squeeze the future in

it is lonely for some

I am blued from numbing
the outlier in every lineup
read my tea leaves
and know me
and tell me
so I may find home
it's lost with the voices
a void space
where things bury themselves
wormy Zion
I always burrow back in
till
there is nothing but a network of tunnels
a completely hollowed underneath
that still somehow supports
the laws of physics
 and society
 and the land

meet my ignorance
and all or none will forgive
radium in the soil
oil in the sea
September in my twenties
gluten in the appetizers
plow us west
steer us on words
momentum is never thought to have a backswing
we are all pendulums
state-fair prizewinning arcs named Big Lass

untie me
unmoor my wrists from the bone
I want out of my hands
a farewell to finger tips and prints
I am adrift
skylark of providence fried in bacon grease
geese in arrows slung to the sun
and fish swirled in the moon
you should have seen
bear witness
I've shared myself by cracking
caffeine withdrawal and mineral deposits
 ore mining
 oar cutting
 our timing
 or nothing

the ship becomes a canoe
the sea becomes a creek
can you captain a wan man crew
this is semantics and
does the grammar even matter when I say help me then
I ask in threes
I prey on thee
I steal bread to know hunger
A fording of white water
 black ice
 exhaust
my paddling is leading me nowhere
to home I lose my arms

new nation state of morning mist and breath stillness still
nesting in my ribs and hips and heels sunless moonless light
In this hour I am not alone although I am by myself it is
a familiar dark swaddling swinging swarming blackness
that fills my lungs to perfect PSI and I could float to for
always on that mass and never age and never revolve never
yoke that hammock of fann witching I own my skins feel it
meet the air and stretch beyond and without delimitations



I am channeling
a vessel
my muscles are steamed open and sucked
clothes are shucked
eyes tucked in behind their lids
we are back in this dream
how would we know
if not for the bucket seats that hold our spines in parallel lines
where we never touch
forwards ad infinitum
remember time is like space
there are no lines only swallowing
five years ago is mercury
we are mutable
and if I could ask more

Orpheus liar look at me

close our eyes and stay asleep

on the brink of everywhere

all at once

lain in change
cricking joints into new moments of being always past future
the present does not exist

we lie to the children
don't worry about the beaks that peck
it is early so let us become eagles
spread on the bed
battered toasted bodies that sink
my father asked me to pray
when I was too young to know to why
I addressed such addresses
but I felt my mouth bubble up like rapids and
frogs
croaking life
my gums held the cosmos
I pooled my spit
and spent it on bubble gum
secretly chewing gnawing gnashing

but I loved

you're holding the afterglow of a long dead star
and it looks as fresh as the second it collapsed to unimaginable
gravity
death does not exist

we lie to our children
grandma and rover and all the neighborhood kids live on
that farm on the TV
tune in and note that the fields are gold
gilded wheat
Rumpelstiltskin wet dream
how is greed different from envy
desire is
yearning lusting craving hankering appetite
wanting waiting thirst and hunger
voracity that gurgles and gorges
itchy love
 since when is discomfort ugly
this pestilence and plague pulses
boils
fervent and feverish and such warmth like summer sun
the same as two bodies beneath sheets
and shrouds
this heat is inevitable
like walking on Venus
who was born of the sea and renounced her womb water for
arid rock and acid sky
upside down back wards zenith
with every peak we disappear
we do not exist

are you the kind to read in the driver's seat
and be bliss like silkworms spinning
this is right
I've left along the side all of my sweaters as the season
changed
and my skin became enough
thick and rough and patchy
a gourdy goiter encapsulating this body
but I still remember the grip of squishing pumpkin guts just
for the fun of it
and that I can't describe
but if you'd eat it you'd know
we've heard that before
all stories lead to the same ending so why expect surprise

yet each night I slip to the shoulder
and wait
pushing out my forehead until my skull is pure suggestion
all my bones are hallow
in theory I could fly
and where the marrow should be I fill them with the pebbles
that sit at the bottom of fish tanks
while I spill light across tar
turning it ash
a morning after pit of dust
where I bury my brain to slowly cook over the day
it is safe there
waiting for someone to stoke it to blue burning
soupy grey matter that I ladle into a hundred bowls
gobble and slurp
thought of my thought
this is my opinion
it is just a snack
eat me
and know me
digest this mass and hold it in your gut like the game winning
ball
and take me home
wherever you think that is
within this dirt
 this earth
 this hearth

back to bed and deep in sleep

I am at the helm

all things in place as if

entropy isn't our default

and we aren't at fault for our own loosing

soon San Andreas will split and

after we fall to the bottom of the cavern I will bask in the striations

after the dark becomes the day

after the moon is more familiar than any earthly wheel

astrolabe made man

crystal ball cul-de-sac

after I've identified you and yours from me and mine so that I may gather up

this life and fold it small enough to fit in snail's shell to unpack

after I've crafted a shore to survive the deluge and

the after has come to remind me of then

this is when I will return to a place I've never been
I'll find you there with a regrown face
blink a thousand times for memory
and ten years will pass in two seconds
to find myself
back among the waiting

Hindsight and Taillights: A Poetics of Transience

Thousands of miles of arid flatland disturbed by sporadic outcroppings of jagged metamorphic rock, buttressed by exposed cliff faces of mountain ranges, Death Valley was named by a group of lost pioneers during the winter of 1849-1850. The sprawling size of the valley and the depth of its floor account for the sweltering temperatures. A perfectly designed natural convection oven, it bakes the air at ground level, heating it further as it rises along the walled perimeter, compounding the relentless heat as the air pockets cool and drop back to the earth only to be scorched all over again. To the unprepared men, it was a three million acre grave, and although no one died in those months, the name has stuck to the unforgiving landscape.

It is no surprise then that life there is scarce. Not only does the valley claim a few tourist lives per year, but it actively discourages habitation. A foreign landscape, almost alien in its inhabitability, yet a mere five hour drive from the populous Los Angeles, a city that boasts a population of four million, Death Valley is home to only a handful of adapted native species. And for the month of January 2018, I counted myself one among them.

I went to Death Valley hoping for a birth. I left the salty, temperate coastline to burry my wheels in the cracked ground, living out of a van that rolled off the assembly line the same year as my sister's birth over two decades prior. For weeks I incubated in the valley, burying myself in sand and dust, nesting my skin and gestating my pen, until I was able to emerge from the wasteland sloughed of all intention, regrown. It was a self imposed desert exile to prompt my personal genesis, and in my casting out I planted my own lines and reeled in new experience.

This was where *Near Before and After* was born. During those short desert days and long nights, I drafted and trashed and redrafted a poem that never seemed to end. I was a poet un-homed, yet more at home than ever before. This apparent dissonance perplexed me and spun my wheels as I worked through what it means to leave and return.

I am still working.

The Death Valley days were ones of disconnect and isolation and singularity—all things antithetical to what I thought I would be doing when I set out. I sought relational poetry and experiential art; I tasked myself with projecting my poems through transient spaces, places that no one stays longer than the time it takes to pass through. I believed that I would be creating and cultivating community, that despite the inherent ephemerality of my process, lasting relationships would be formed, at the very least artistically by ensnaring other passerby into my work.

But what I found was that the communities that preoccupied me the most were the ones left behind and the ones yet to be formed. The present did not exist in the desert. It was a polycyclic web of before and after, but never during. It was baffling, and I tried to catch the moment with greased fingers, never getting a tight enough grip. All intentions I had nulled in favor of longing in both temporal directions—the communities I imagined were as transient as the spaces, only lasting in their abstract nature of being, rather than in my ability to continually access them. Thinking of home in the sense of the past and the possibility of the future—family, friends, familiarity with place and space—relationships that require stasis, a need that was only feasible in the past or in the future, and for this time, never in the moment for longer than the moment itself.

I tried to reconcile expectation with reality as I sat on highway shoulders or in turnouts, wheels sunken low in the loose gravel. In dusks that bled into nights, my poems in process queued on my computer, which was in turn, plugged into a projector that had only enough battery power to sustain thirty minutes of light we sat in wait—me, the poems, and my dog, ready to accept whoever crossed our paths, filling the spaces as the time stretched between one vehicle and another rolling through our gate of light. It was a small, dark window of time that I spilt my light across, hoping for something to manifest that made sense of this increasingly empty space. Often times nothing passed through my beams of poetry, rendering the work illegible as it sped forever outwards, as far as the bulb could throw its shadow, and I was left in the isolation to further wonder about the things I'd left behind.

The project continued despite unanticipated technical challenges, poetic changes, and an agenda-less course of action. I learned to operate a camera effectively enough to capture the image of my projections when they did coalesce; I abandoned and repurposed poems I had written prior to my departure because in process, they pithily played with form, never reaching the center of the whirlpool I had been riding; I drove and parked, sleeping in campgrounds, parking lots, and roadsides, only planning as far ahead as the next city to stop for gas or rest or sights.

The only constant was desert. From high to low elevations, the scrub and dust followed everywhere, kicking up from the wheels of the van as it drove thousands of miles across state lines and eternal landscapes. It was a daily reminder of the isolation, the foreign, the otherworldly. The extend of my personal exposure to the mythos of the desert revolved around the action of exile. Moses and the Jews from Egypt for 40 years, Jesus from his disciples for 40 days, Odysseus from his homeland and family to the sea, a watery desert of salty inhabitability, and I wrote as if I too were cast out into the desert to question all my temptations of comfort. In the literal sense I was deprived of any security an established environment might offer, and artistically, I was forced to confront my rooted methods of process. I have always been an artist of constraint. I seek concepts before I evaluate content,

sometimes to the final work's detriment. So to abandon all expectation, even opening myself up to the possibility that the projections themselves may not make the final cut, I felt unmoored from my comfort, my expectations, and my process. But in this open space I was free to explore.

I devoured myth. From the Bible to the Greeks, I looked for the threads of community in literary history. As I quested and cast out from one desert to the next, crossing through the Southwest for months, I grounded myself and my poems in the iconography and language of these texts. *The Odyssey* in particular called its siren song to me, resonating with my vessel as I travelled unknown lands, searching to return to a place that may not exist—even when you reenter a place that was once home, the change taking place in the interim can render any familiar thing foreign. I found my work shaping into five sections, the number ten appearing and repeating in form and content. Concrete poems bridged a narrative and visual gap, acting as a Greek chorus, shifting voice to abstraction, becoming roadmaps for the longer epic.

What fills the pages between the visuals in *Near Before and After* is what I casually refer to as the long poem. By external standards, this poem is not lengthy in any extreme, but it does surpass any sustained effort I've ever engaged in. My natural tendency towards constraint manifests in tight, self-contained poems, but for whatever reason, this poetic encounter seemed to never resolve. And that cyclicity, that building and crescendoing, that continuous revolve as a tire rolls endlessly through a journey with no delineable end, is what powered the long poem through five acts: a dream, a casting out, a nostalgic reckoning, a journeying, and a return.

While I toyed with what it means to leave and return, the hows behind building a community within a self, I utilized the momentum of journeying down to the very language. I became hyper focused with prepositions as units of speech that reflect relationships between time and/or space. The relationality inherent in these words spoke to my desires to seek out communities and relationships, between others and selves, as I worked from outset to end. There are moments in the long poem that stutter between prepositions and their function in compound words and phrasing, showing the slight variations inherent in every speech act, highlighting the way language bends like tricks of light. The play in these passages also reveals a sonic element of the poem that resonates with the circular motion of tire treads grinding over gravel, the beat that pushes forwards, while not necessarily moving onwards.

This project facilitated my preoccupation with living and writing in media res—traveling has been a means to unlock another tempo of living, a means to escape the present and transcend time and space. Nothing holds. Everything bleeds. And in a blink of an odometer I am 9,000 miles ahead, and states away from my first desert, Death Valley. But I can still smell the salt flats of Badwater Basin, and feel the blue striations at Artist's

Point, and taste the sun in the back of my throat. And even now, sitting at my desk, the closest thing I feel to home in any location, I am again struck by the way the past reaches out to pull me close. And for now, the future looks equally as hazy as a desert mirage, and I am want to fill my tank to drive out and meet that tomorrow all the more because of it.

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