Drifting: Time and Plot in a Global Pandemic

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Abstract

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At the height of quarantine, countless headlines assured us that everyone was thinking about time—how much of it we now had, and how strangely it was passing. We greeted each new month with dismay and genuine shock. How could it really, truly be December, when April was just yesterday?

But the more I thought about quarantine time, the more I began to suspect that this wasn't an issue of time at all, but rather of plot. What was missing from our quarantined existence was not the experience of time passing, but rather the absence of plot, of one event leading to another. Time moved forward, but didn't yield the gifts or the consequences that we've grown accustomed to. This is the perfect time to be writing a plotless novel, because so many of us have recently been—or currently are—stuck in one. In this mid-pandemic thesis, I turn towards a plotless canon in order to inform and inspire my own novel manuscript.

Drifting: Time and Plot in a Global Pandemic

It feels appropriate to be writing a time traveling novel in December 2020, otherwise known as March 291st. Nine months ago, a student emailed me asking to be excused from class on account of the novel coronavirus. This student went a step further, actually, recommending that I cancel class entirely. They cited the speed of transmission in China, a news story that was still very much on the periphery, at least for me. My student's absence was a dark bead on the rosary of an average morning. I worried over it for a minute or two and then passed over, on to whatever task or thought surfaced next.

Then, things changed. The subject of the ominous email grew from a bead to a tumor, claiming more and more space in my brain and the brains of everyone around me. In our shared office, my friends and I hid coughs from one another; claimed hiccups, or water winding its way through wrong pipes. My glassy eyes, nasal drip, and occasional cough felt like a scarlet letter. I found myself telling near strangers about my allergies, pulling out endless inhalers from my bag like a magic trick, ostentatiously popping allergy pills on the 32 bus. I was paranoid of looking sick, paranoid of getting sick, paranoid of others. I washed my hands constantly, and I read so many tweets. My mother summoned me home; once, twice, then daily. She told me that she was having nightmares, dreams in which states closed borders and airlines went on lockdown, dreams in which I was stranded on the other coast and couldn't get back to her.

At the bookstore where I worked, A and Q looked sidewise at my Clorox wipes. It wasn't that they didn't believe in the virus. They just didn't think it would get as bad in Seattle as it had in Wuhan; they thought it would pass. And it's mostly airborne, anyway, Q said. Sanitizing every last hardcover or coffee cup won't do much. Thinking about going home was another overreaction, until I told them about my mother's dreams. She's not like, psychic or anything, I

insisted. Still, in the half-empty bookstore, these visions held weight. You should go, they said. So I went. I packed a bag and threw out anything perishable—leftovers, meat, kale. I told my roommate I'd see her next quarter. Six months later, I came home to dead plants, the smell of disuse, a thin layer of dust. When I first turned on my sink, it coughed and ran brown. Otherwise, everything was how I left it. My bed was made, my library books stacked. I drank the six pack I'd bought at Trader Joe's six months ago.

It's a great year to write a time traveling novel, because everyone is talking about time—how it moves, how we move inside of it. We can all list the peculiar qualities of pandemic time—more specifically, for those of us with the privilege of staying at/working from home, quarantine time. Every day feels the same: same apartment, same laptop, same sweatpants. We have so much time to pass, to fill with Netflix and baking, Twitter and crocheting, staring at the wall and candle-making. Still, each new month is greeted with dismay, and genuine shock. How can it really, truly be December, when April was just yesterday? Each second feels like a hard grain of sand, discretely considered and heavy in our hands, but it slips through fingers all the same. Suddenly, you're standing next to a pile of time, even though you're still wearing the same sweatpants, and haven't moved from your desk by the window. No one understands where the time has gone.

In a Vox article, "2020 was a time warp", Shannon Stirone calls this phenomenon "time melt." "Our hours and days dissolve together into some nebulous glob of experiences," She writes. "Lunch is whenever. Dinner is whenever. There is no more gym or meals with friends or travel plans. Our days are now simply that: days." To me, though, this isn't an issue of time so much as it is an issue of plot, or story. Time hasn't absconded, isn't passing slower or faster; we've just lost our daily distractions from its passage. Now, there is only time—seconds,

months, days. In *The Art of Time in Fiction*, Joan Silber writes of time as an "agent" of plot. A character makes a decision and then time passes, forcing consequences. Seasons pass, and seed-choices bear fruit. Silber posits that "all fiction has to contend with the experience of time passing. First one thing happens and then another: that's a story for you." What's missing from our quarantined existence is not the experience of time passing, but rather the absence of action, of plot, of one event leading to another. Time moves forward, but doesn't yield the gifts or the consequences that we've grown accustomed to.

Now, instead of meaty plot points, important events, and evolving storylines, we have hobbies and endless distractions. Take the very fact that I'm so often talking to friends about the nature of time, that we've been exclaiming over how wild it is that it's no longer March ever since April. These countless, identical discussions of time warp, played out over unvarying pandemic months, are proof enough that nothing else is going on. With an absence of story action comes an anecdote deficit. I can count on two hands the number of things I've done this quarantine that feel worth recounting.

In an essay for *The Millions*, Mark O'Connell echoes Silber's definition of a story, but also allows for the possibility of a different kind of fiction. "The great narratives are all about men and women going outside and having things happen to them," he writes. "To stay indoors is to ensure that nothing much happens to you. Not going out of the house, voluntarily or otherwise, is a way of forswearing plots of all sorts."

I'm thinking about this TikTok trend—I've been getting really into TikTok—called "main character." Users make videos of themselves in which they emphasize, or imagine, that they are the main characters in their lives. This mainly consists of plugging oneself into an established narrative, usually some sort of TV or movie trope. In one video, hash tagged main

character, the creator jokes about walking away from friends for a moment "to be the unique one." Images of him sitting alone, dramatically staring off into the distance, flash over a Lana del Rey song. The caption on another clip reads, "I literally just ran through the field with this song it was cinematic it felt like nothing could stop me and I felt like the main character." It makes perfect sense that teenagers are fantasizing about inserting themselves into other, more compelling narratives—going out of their way to construct worlds in which they are overtly legible as protagonists. After all, we're all taught that characters act, that action rises and climaxes. If we're not outside doing things, making moves and being seen, then what kind of characters are we? What kind of story is this, anyway?

These TikTokers have been promised a starring turn in their own "great narrative," only to find themselves plopped down in a difficult work of experimental fiction; the kind with a limited readership, that rarely attracts book deals or movie adaptations. This is the perfect time to consider the plotless novel, because so many of us are currently stuck in one.

O'Connell's piece, written before COVID, also provokes my discomfort or reticence to talk about plotlessness at all. While quarantine certainly exaggerates a sense of stasis, and has moved questions of time and forward motion to the fore, the kind of narratives that O'Connell is describing precede the pandemic. Being able to write an entire novel about sitting in a room, let alone having the resources to sit in a room and write all day, has always been a luxury. But in a pandemic, this indulgence feels particularly charged. To experience a sense of plotlessness right now, let alone to complain about it, feels like a champagne problem. We can juxtapose this absence of plot with the stark causality of the world outside our quarantine bubbles. I can afford to live in a room, an apartment, where nothing much happens. Outside, decisions, actions, fleeting moments of contact and exposure, have serious, even deadly consequences.

This tension is consistent with my (extremely over-generalized) understanding of the plotless Western canon. When I think about famous plotless works, I jump immediately to Virginia Woolf—particularly Mrs. Dalloway—or Henry Green. In an essay on this very subject, "The Privilege of Plotlessness," Lynn Steger Strong describes Green's *Party Going* as a novel that "has no plot and is often close to incomprehensible. There are men and women who want to sleep with one another. There is booze, a falling fog. Nothing happens—someone takes a bath, someone might be dying, there is a lot of lying and half-telling and flirting—you never quite know who you're with or where you're going." While these sorts of gaieties read quite differently than the fictionalized memoirs of a shut-in, there's a connective tissue of wealth and resources that act as a buffer, keeping either consequences or action itself at bay. Strong highlights a number of plotless works that were written in times of great upheaval; often "rejected…as frivolous and pointless, plotless and about rich people at a time when the world was falling down." In examining plotlessness head on, I've been searching for works that don't exist in this vacuum. I'm less interested in plotlessness as a reflection of lived listlessness, gravitating instead towards works in which plot subversion acts as a defining feature of the fiction, a deliberate stance or provocation.

I've always struggled with plot. There's something so artificial about it, for me—sitting down and designing an arc, setting up hurdles for your characters to jump through, arguments they might find themselves in, room after room populated by people you've concocted for the express purpose of moving the story along—steering protagonists just so. I have no idea why this is the line that I draw, this arbitrary border between organic and phony. Creating characters, translating voices on to the page, and even weaving in fabricated backstories and stolen details all seems perfectly natural to me. I have no scruples when it comes to fake people, but I'm

reticent to make them jump through hoops. In writing workshops and even before that, as far back as red comments in the margins of my middle school assignments, I've been told that nothing happens in my stories. It's something I almost stopped hearing—because the feedback was so consistent, I just took this quality for granted in my work, as if it was inherent. If anything, I found myself flirting with the outer limits of plotlessness, seeing how far I could go. I have a clear memory of a professor interrupting a discussion of my piece to point out the only readily apparent action of the story—a sunbathing character turning from their back on to their stomach. I remember being surprised, because I hadn't realized the full extent of my plot neglect. But I was also a little proud; it felt badass and bold to be so derelict.

In retrospect, I don't think any of these stories were working as well as I thought they were. But I was encouraged by the readers who would chime in to defend my plotlessness in workshop, to say that they had hardly noticed the lack of plot propulsion. They said that something else— "voice," whatever that means—had pulled them through when plot failed to do so. Still, I don't think I ever conceived of my lack of plot—which, to be clear, was the result of me giving myself blanket permission not to think about plot and action in my prose—as a good thing. I knew it was a quality of the work I was submitting, but I didn't go so far as to fool myself into thinking it was a strength. Rather, I was convinced that my ability to get away with ignoring such an essential component of fiction proved that I had talent—like a basketball player who manages to make the shot with her dominant hand tied behind her back. Looking back on my old writing, these stories where nothing ever happened, I see an interesting experiment being conducted by an unscrupulous, lazy scientist. I wasn't playing with plot or reckoning seriously with its absence—I just wasn't thinking very much at all.

O'Connell also describes plot as artifice, writing, "When a writer manages to cut away all this artifice, leaving us with just the raw pulp of personhood, while still compelling us to read on, it is a fascinating trick to pull off." During this past pandemic summer I started reading *Drifts* by Kate Zambreno, a novel that pulls off that same trick that I've been tiptoeing around, halfheartedly attempting. Many reviews of this book pull out the same quote, in which Zambreno writes about her vision of the novel she is writing, the one we are now reading: "A memoir about nothing." Or this one: "Who are the characters in your novel, the publishing people ask me, and does anything happen?" These are not the only points at which Zambreno's manuscript turns reflexive, or meta—consistently, she muses on the book that is due, the book that she is struggling to conceptualize, to midwife into being. In between thinking about writing her book and thinking about how she is failing to write her book, Zambreno's protagonist cries and masturbates, watches movies and windows and neighborhood cats. Occasionally, she goes to a dinner or meets with a friend. She writes and receives notes from other writers, fractals that reflect the concerns of the larger work: writing, art, survival.

"What is a drift?" Zambreno muses. "Perhaps a drift is a sort of form." Jane Alison's *Meander, Spiral, Explode* gives me a newfound appreciation and language for Zambreno's formal experimentation. Zambreno's attempt to write a "drift"—to move forward slowly, without the turbo-powered push of plot—is in easy conversation with Alison's book, which diagnoses natural patterns in prose, other means of gaining momentum. Alison presents these patterns as an alternative to the dramatic arc, in which "a situation arises, grows tense, reaches a peak, subsides." She challenges us, as reader and writers, to recognize "other shapes"— "a way beyond the causal arc to create powerful forward motion in narrative." *Drifts* is full of patterning, repetition. Zambreno will introduce a work of art and then cause it to resurface, the narrator

returning again to a certain scene or image, now in a new context, a new light. There are also meditations on writing that almost operate as prompts. The narrator will puzzle over the problem of capturing time on the page, converting a day into a paragraph, and then we will watch as the book attempts to do just that. Or, the narrator, an adjunct professor, will lecture on a monochrome passage, and the pages that follow will be shot through with a single color. Reading Jane Alison, I began to recognize these quirks as a foundational strategy, undergirding a different kind of novel: one in which the main motion "happens in the reader's mind as she works to see what's going on, to pull lines across the whole." Alison's analysis shifted my perspective entirely. Where in the past I might have diagnosed *Drifts'* dearth of plot as a symptom of authorial overconfidence, I now felt the presence of a writer who is confident in their reader; who gives them work to do, and brings them in as co-conspirators.

The pull that carried me through *Drifts* wasn't as all-encompassing as with other novels I've read—page-turners, the un-put-downable. Instead, as Zambreno drifted, I drifted. In fact, my reading experience was less of being pulled through than of coming back. I dabbled in *Drifts*, made the conscious choice to spend days in Zambreno's days, or more accurately, hours—a page or two about a work of art, a tangent on Rilke, a passage in which Zambreno looks out onto the world from a commuter train. Of course, it helped that Zambreno's project of wringing meaning out of monotony, of producing art in some degree of isolation, had recently become my own. While not technically a pandemic novel, *Drifts* captures much of the reality of quarantine, of a restless mind in a still room. But just as Zambreno's near-isolation is voluntary, a personal and artistic choice, so too is the rejection of plot in her novel.

Drifts isn't actually a novel in which nothing happens, but it is a project that purposefully de-emphasizes causal events, rejects plot as main narrative engine. I base this argument on the

revelation, about two-thirds through the book, that the narrator is pregnant. A different iteration of this novel would have been organized entirely around this pregnancy. Even if the event itself was held back to maintain a sense of linear narrative, with the unexpected pregnancy occurring near the end of the timespan of the novel, the thread of reproduction and maternity might have been woven throughout. But even when given this unexpected plot point, Zambreno refuses to organize around it, to put that unplanned happening on some sort of pedestal, the peak of dramatic arc. Instead, pregnancy appears abruptly and late in the narrative. It refuses to be artificially placed or portended earlier on, to act in all the ways an editor might hope it would. To give the pregnancy more weight, to sustain that storyline throughout, would feel artificial. If the readers were provided with that connecting line, they would lose the experience of drifts, the opportunity to draw their own lines and conclusions from this collection of unbidden days and fleeting moments. The novel as published reads like "plot" as lived, as experienced—things just happen to us, sometimes entirely unexpected things, on page 200 of our 300-page novels. We so often create narratives and storylines in retrospect, draw conclusions from a year or a decade in review. The days, as we live them, are just days.

In *Drifts*, Zambreno cites an unnamed contemporary, failing to conceal both his identity and her contempt. Zambreno's narrator and her writer friends are annoyed when a "prominent writer of so-called autofiction with a half-million-dollar advance on his last book wins the so-called genius grant." It feels wicked, then, to put Zambreno and Ben Lerner in conversation, but their novels do speak to one another (and not just in subtweets). In his latest, *The Topeka School*, Lerner jumps in and out of POVs, capturing the perspectives of multiple members of one family unit, along with some outsiders. In the alternate reality version of this novel, one might expect these shifts to be deliberately employed in the service of plot and story, jumping from one

interiority to another in order to flesh out a timeline, fill in gaps of experience or perception. This is exactly what Lerner doesn't do. Reconsidering this novel through the lens of plotlessness (or even plot aversion?), I charted all of the narrative threads that are abruptly dropped, the discrete events (a revelation of childhood abuse, a mental health crisis, a marital affair) marooned without cause and/or effect.

Instead of tying up these lose threads, Lerner lets moments and mannerisms echo across timelines, shows family members wrestling with parallel situations and demons decades apart. As described by Lerner himself, "In this particular novel, patterning is the plot—because so much of it is about how events get repeated across generations." Simultaneously, there's repetition of themes, concepts, language, imagery—patterns that recur not in the story, but on the page itself. The concept of "spatial form", which I encountered in *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, strikes me as a good fit for Lerner and Zambreno's output— "texts…which don't care much about causal or temporal relations but grow through linked ideas, images, or phrases."

It's clear to me that these texts offer crucial lessons or even blueprints for my own novel, which blatantly eschews "causal or temporal relations." The book I'm writing is in two parts. The early chapters take place in a New York City of the very near future (off the page, I think of it as 2022). My protagonist, Ellie, feels herself to be living at both the end and the edge of the world. Keenly aware of the impending apocalypse, whatever form it may take, Ellie is already nostalgic for the life she is living—mainly, for her relationship with her best friend and roommate, Cassandra. At the end of this opening section, Ellie's routine pining is interrupted by the introduction of a new character, Seth. Ellie immediately throws herself into a relationship with Seth, which the reader is quickly informed will end in calamity and heartbreak. Throughout these opening pages, we also come to learn that Ellie is something of a history buff, although she

plays fast and loose with historical accuracy. Ellie doesn't just think about the past, or apply historical precedent to her own present—she projects herself through time and space, attempting to inhabit the historical figures and milieus that interest her. This characterization is an attempt to prime readers for the jump, which is really more like a crater, between the beginning and the rest of the book.

In chapter three (or at least, it's chapter three in my current draft) we meet Mary, a part-time bartender in Philadelphia, 1779. Mary lives and works in a tavern/boarding house/brothel called the Lion & the Lamb. Mary is in love with the tavern owner, Elizabeth, and essentially works as an act of fealty towards her. In fact, Mary's entire life is dedicated to "serving" Elizabeth—she does odd jobs for her, lends her money, buys her countless presents, and their sexual dynamic is service-oriented. Mary breaks with Elizabeth after encountering the preachings of the Public Universal Friend, the American preacher and leader of the Christian sect known as the Universal Friends (I think it's worth disclosing at this point that, unlike Mary and Elizabeth, the Public Universal Friend is a real historical figure). She then transfers her worship from Elizabeth to the Public Universal Friend, devoting herself fully to a love that can never be requited, with an individual who does not see themselves as a person, but as a divine spirit wholly dedicated to preaching the word of God.

While I expect some of the parallels between these two narratives to speak for themselves, I'm increasingly aware of how patterning and repetition might serve to dial up this parallelism. After all, the novel relies entirely on the reader's ability and willingness to draw connections between the two parts of the book. Not only do the characters/world of the introduction essentially disappear after just a few chapters, and not only do the two parts have no clear causal relationship, but both part A and part B have been deliberately deflated of plot and

plot-based tension. The Ellie narrative, for example, is all leading towards this first interaction/budding romance with Seth. But in more or less the same breath, the reader is made privy to the entire future arc of this doomed relationship. From the very start we, and, to some degree, Ellie, know where this is going to end. The romance between Mary and the Public Universal Friend is similarly absent of potential or true suspense. Mary is a woman, and the Public Universal Friend believes themselves to be a god; Mary is entirely focused on the Public Universal Friend, while the preacher is entirely focused on their religious following and teachings, which in large part consist of predicting an impending apocalypse. Because of the current day narrative that precedes the Mary/PUF portion of the novel, we know that this doomsday prophecy is never going to happen. Additionally, it will hopefully be apparent to readers that the second part of the novel is filtered through Ellie, introducing the added challenge of investing in a "secondary", fabricated storyline (relayed by a wholly unreliable narrator, no less).

In his novel *10:04*, Ben Lerner sets up some kindred challenges for himself, as he blurs the lines between his "real" self and his fictionalized narrator, the world on and off the page. *10:04*, like *Drifts*, is simultaneously a novel and the account of crafting said novel. The protagonist, like Lerner himself, is attempting to expand a story that he wrote for *The New Yorker* into a full-fledged novel. As events unfold, we're constantly led to question the veracity of the story, as Lerner considers and blurs the boundaries between Ben Lerner the author and Ben Lerner the fictionalized self. At one point, rhapsodizing about his novel project, Lerner writes, "I'll project myself into several futures simultaneously." In making space for multiple timelines and a multitude of selves in his novel, Lerner risks reader confusion and apathy, inevitable questions of what really happened, how much of this is true. I'm fascinated by the way

that Lerner casts doubt on the veracity of his story even in the moments when emotional stakes are at their highest, and reader investment is likely commensurate. I can't stop thinking about one of these moments in *10:04*. Drugged out after a trip to the dentist, our narrator is taken home by his best friend and possible love interest, whose name alternates between Liza and Alex throughout the novel.

> "Then he was aware of moving at an impossibly smooth rate, and there was the Brooklyn Bridge, cablework sparkling. Liza was cursing at the little touch-screen television in the taxi, which she couldn't seem to turn off, and he reached out a hand to help her and experienced contact with the glass as a marvel, like encountering solidified, sensate air. Then he was smoothing her hair back and she was laughing at this uncharacteristic intimacy, something he'd done only a few times in their six years. Now the view again, and it occurred to him with the force of revelation:
>
> I won't remember this. This is the most beautiful view of the city I have ever seen, the most perfect experience of touch and speed, I've never felt so close to Liza, and I won't remember it; the drugs will erase it. And then, glowing with the aura of imminent disappearance, it really was the most beautiful view, experience. He wanted badly to describe this situation to Liza but couldn't: his tongue was still numb; he couldn't even ask her to remind him of what the drugs would erase. While he was distantly aware that Liza would tease him for it later, that he was being ridiculous, he felt tears start in his eyes as they merged onto the bridge and he watched the play of late October sunlight on the water. That he would form no memory of what he observed and could not record it in any language lent it a fullness, made it briefly identical to itself, and he was deeply moved to think this experience of presence depended upon its obliteration. Then he was in his apartment; Liza gave him a couple of pills, put him to bed, and left.
>
> He woke around midnight and felt like himself. His jaw ached a little. He pissed, changed the russet-colored, saturated gauze, and took another painkiller with a full glass of water. He texted Liza and also Josh, who had asked how it all went. He smiled at how much time he'd wasted ruminating about the extractions; it was nothing. He streamed an episode of The Wire on his laptop and fell asleep.
>
> When he got out of bed late the next morning and had his coffee — iced so as not to disrupt the clotting — he realized: I do remember the drive, the view, stroking Liza's hair, the incommunicable beauty destined to disappear. I remember it, which means it never happened."

The protagonist and Alex's relationship is the heart of *10:04*; their will-they-or-won't-they is the novel's most direct flirtation with a dramatic arc. But instead of advancing this relationship

by giving the characters this moment of long-awaited intimacy, Lerner pulls a literary Schrodinger's cat via an interaction that both did and did not occur. This is not an absence of plot, but rather a deliberate undermining. To say that Lerner just doesn't think much about plot—and Lerner has said that he doesn't think too much about plot—feels weak. This is something fiercer than that—if not a full aversion to plot, at least a healthy skepticism; and, I think, a desire to push back against it.

Eileen Myles, another poet-novelist, is unapologetically anti-plot. *Cool For You* follows a queer protagonist who, like Myles, comes from a working-class Boston family and has always longed to be a poet. The novel moves through a number of cities and institutions, follows the protagonist from childhood into adulthood, from one disappointing school to another, from one demoralizing job to the next. I don't love this novel—I much prefer Myles' *Inferno*—but I'm obsessed with a quote that's cited in the introduction. During an interview about *Cool For You*, Myles apparently told a reporter, "Plot doesn't interest me that much, but time travel does."

Which brings me back, of course, to my time travel novel. Like Myles, I'm not preoccupied with the mechanics of time travel, the whole magic system. Particularly now, in the age of time melt, I don't think readers will strain to imagine the timeline conflation that's so central to my project. Through patterning and repetition—of words, descriptions, events, dynamics—readers are meant to see Ellie and Mary as mirrors, as reincarnations of the same character, playing out the same patterns. I picture Ellie's approach to summoning/inhabiting Mary's story as a sort of seance. The bulk of the story, this historical imagining, is entirely dependent on Ellie. Her desires, her past, her way of seeing and being in the world are all cast onto this fictional, Colonial-era woman. It's Ellie, not some twist of fate or sci-fi machinery, who transports us.

As we all collectively lose our grip on time, find ourselves replaying and living through the past as a response to our static present, is it so hard to imagine someone slipping in and out of timelines, living in or through the historical past? Like Lerner, I'm taking the risk of refusing to harvest low-hanging plot fruit. A traditional time travel novel is full of causal events, of escalating action and character continuity, as a character makes choices, risks consequences, jumps through time and often attempts or struggles to come back. In lieu of this natural arc, these high stakes and intriguing mechanics, I'm choosing blank space. I'm hoping that readers will take up the challenge of connecting these two timelines, these related characters and parallel relationships. To quote Jane Alison, again, "The main motion…happens in the reader's mind as she works to see what's going on, to pull lines across the whole."

"Plot doesn't interest me that much, but time travel does." Myles' words draw further connections within my personal canon of experimental historical fiction—novels that have given me inspiration and permission. In addition to Myles' *Cool For You* and *Inferno*, there's *Confessions of the Fox* by Jordy Rosenberg and Sara Stridsberg's *Valerie*. Initially, I gravitated towards these works because, like me, their authors take liberties with real historical figures. In the preface to *Valerie*, Stridsberg emphasizes that her project is no biography, writing, "Few facts are known about Valerie Solanas and this novel is not faithful even to those." Eschewing historical accuracy, Stridsberg attempts her own literary seance. Through imagined conversations and fictional interactions, counterfeit documents and falsified transcripts, Stridsberg summons Solanas. More than that, she summons her own Solanas—a foil and a mentor and an accomplice. Stridsberg unabashedly resurrects the Valerie of her dreams, and then proceeds to hold this complicated figure to account.

Throughout the novel, Stridsberg wrestles with the difficult questions that Solanas raised in her own short life, going down rabbit holes of gender, celebrity and trauma, exploring deep and un-resolvable divides within the women's liberation movement. But Stridsberg doesn't settle for following in her hero's footsteps. Instead, she goes to the enigmatic source, sitting Solanas down and demanding answers. A number of scenes in the book take place at Solanas' deathbed, where Stridsberg inserts herself fully into the narrative. The narrator, attempting to finish her Valerie Solanas novel, sits beside her, asking all of the questions that the real Solanas left unanswered.

In a *New Yorker* review, Katy Waldman aches over these interactions. "The narrator's relationship to Solanas, and her understanding of what Solanas means to her, forms the heart of the book, but Solanas herself remains out of reach, saturating 'Valerie' with sorrow and yearning. This dynamic is embedded in the deathbed conceit. No sooner does the narrator dream a mentor to life than she is forced to watch that life slip away." I have a different reading, though. I experience those deathbed conversation scenes as a respite, or a rescue mission. For one, they're flagrantly unreal. The presence of the narrator in the room makes it clear that this is no exaggerated scene, or history with a flourish. A character from our present, the assumed author of the novel, is inexplicably sat in a filthy hotel room with Valerie Solanas in 1988. By virtue of this impossibility, we conclude that we are in a space that is outside of time. I imagine it like a vacuum, or a dream, this meeting-place that Stridsberg has constructed and populated by sheer force of her longing. But this summit is hardly selfish. By placing herself at Solanas' deathbed, instead of some earlier scene in her life or even a neutral meeting site, Stridsberg is softening Solanas' fate. It's as though, after writing around the countless traumas and disappointments that Solanas really did endure, Stridsberg can't bear to just leave her there,

dying in that hotel room. It's at this moment, Solanas' lowest, that Stridsberg goes to her. As long as Stridsberg is there, questioning her, Solanas can't die, not yet.

In *Confessions of the Fox*, Jordy Rosenberg similarly evokes a gathering place outside of space and time; a queer utopia, off the grid and off the map, where characters across historical eras can peacefully converge. It's an impossible book to effectively summarize. In short, a scholar named Dr. Voth finds a manuscript promising the true story of the 18th century thief Jack Sheppard. In this manuscript, Sheppard is a trans man in love with Bess, a sex worker of color. As Dr. Voth wrestles with the authenticity and implications of this alternative history, he faces increasing repression and surveillance from the powers-that-be, a corporate entity that encompasses the university where Dr. Voth works, the technology he works on, the pharmaceutical company that distributes his hormones, etc. We get Dr. Voth's narrative through his footnotes, comments on the Sheppard manuscript that run parallel to the action. In that primary text, Sheppard and his lover are coming up against analogous systems of power. They're on the run from the state and from a potent alliance of police, medical researchers, and capitalists, who would incarcerate Sheppard and "study" him in the hopes of producing a profitable commodity. As Dr. Voth's research and reading of the manuscript progresses, he comes to find that some of these trans-historical threads are simply not of their time. Anachronistic phrases, quotes from modern-day texts, and frameworks of 20th century queer and anti-racist theory dot the manuscript, leading Dr. Voth to a major realization. Citing the ancient Greek practice of Plitho-hypomnesis, or "collective-diary-keeping," Voth explains, "I've come to the inescapable conclusion that the confessions of Jack Sheppard contain, as they say, multitudes. Put more simply, they are not exactly a single memoir. They are something else. That something, broadly speaking, is the plitho-hypomnesis of, for lack of a better word, us."

Rosenberg opens the novel with a foreword that is also an epilogue. It appears to take place after the central events of the book have already occurred—the discovery of the manuscript, the struggles over its editing/publication, etc.—when Dr. Voth, looking to ensure his own safety as well as that of the text, runs away. "Some time ago," the book begins, "Never mind how long precisely—I slipped off the map of the world. I took the manuscript with me." This early disclosure, for me, is another example of plot de-emphasis. Before we even enter the action, we are promised a conclusion beyond and outside of the world of the manuscript. With this foretelling, Rosenberg takes some tension off the central question of the novel—what will happen to Dr. Voth and his manuscript? —encouraging the reader to search for meaning beyond and outside of plot.

"I'm afraid I can't indulge your curiosity as far as where I am," Dr. Voth writes. "Suffice to say that I am very far away, and I do not mean this primarily in terms of space. I am living at a different timescale. Not parallel to yours, but apart from it." I believe that the works of Rosenberg, Stridsberg, and Myles can all be read through the lens of queer time. As theorist Jack Halberstam explains, "Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience-namely birth, marriage, reproduction, and death." *Confessions of the Fox, Cool for You, Inferno,* and *Valerie,* all depict subjects who "will and do opt to live outside of reproductive and familial time as well as on the edges of logics of labor and production." (Halberstam) In *Confessions of the Fox*, this position outside of time is made tangible. Lives lived outside of traditional, heteronormative standards and logics are quite literally transported to another place, where they defy time altogether. Describing the location he has slipped away to, Dr. Voth evokes "a colossal library in chitlin, spiderweb and glass that

sprawls at the edges of the floating alleys of the central square," where he and his new friends work as students, archivists, and re-writers of queer history. "My new friends do not connive themselves as living in the year 2018," he continues, "They are living in the year WE ESCAPED! This year has lasted them a long time. They do not know how long it will last."

In the final moments of the Sheppard manuscript, Jack follows Bess to an unknown, undisclosed location—undoubtedly the same locale that Dr. Voth fled to centuries later. Thinking about Rosenberg's bold defiance of/experimentation with both plot and time, I remember a quote from *The Art of Time in Fiction*: "'All stories, if continued far enough, end in death.' The sequence of any fiction is, by its nature, the path of time evaporating." *Confessions of the Fox,* then, is an intervention. In both of the storylines, causal events accrue, plot advances and time evaporates. And then, suddenly, it doesn't. The sense of "no future" that so often pervades queer life and queer temporality is replaced with its utopian counterpart, this glorious, alien futurity; communal immortality. Rosenberg: "My new friends see a different future reflected like light off broken shards."

Silber also posits that, "We read anything looking for a pattern of events, and through it a meaning…Plot is how a writer indicates the ways she or he thinks the world works." *Confessions of the Fox* is actually chock-full of plot—arguments and entanglements and races against the clock, the age-old battle of good versus evil. Rosenberg's trick, then, is to devise a plot (two, actually) that so accurately reflects the way the world works—how queer, radical figures across space and time heroically resist systems that are so much bigger than themselves. The stories of both Dr. Voth and Jack Sheppard bend towards extraction and annihilation at the hands of capitalism, colonialism, the police state…and then, suddenly, they leave their own stories, walk right out of the rational plots that would end in their heroic demise. Here is plotlessness not as a

privilege but an instrument of contention—a facet of the work that might be manipulated or subverted in service of a larger goal. Like Stridsberg, Rosenberg is on a historical rescue mission, parachuting his characters out of plot and time (and into a beautiful library, no less). But Rosenberg's interruption is more thorough, more ambitious. Instead of the brief reprieve that Stridsberg offers Solanas at her deathbed, something like a mirage, Rosenberg has written an oasis. Outside of present and past, outside of history, Rosenberg has created a shimmering, safe, still place, eternally holding the inevitable at bay.

The novel I'm writing is inspired by two people I've loved. But it's not about those relationships: neither an account of what happened, nor an imagining of what could have been. Ultimately, it's about the act of adoration. In the novel, it is this act, more so than any one character or relationship, that's meant to reverberate. Prayer, worship, mortification, self-abjection, careful observation, fucking, making art—all forms of devotion. While I set out to inscribe the eternal gesture of one human being reaching towards another, studying these texts has made me aware of a different act of love, one that is just as central to the story I am writing. Even as Ellie appears to be single-minded in her pursuit of the objects of her affection, she's also reserved some care and consideration for herself. I am thinking, here, about how Eileen Myles uses the novel—Woolf's "most pliable of all forms"—to move through time and space; not to some fabulous era or galaxy, but to their former self. To travel back to the family dinner tables and worn school desks where their childhood self is sitting, lonely and desirous, never suspecting that they will have so much more than all they've dreamed of. Myles time travels as a writer, but also as a witness, a steadfast companion. I'm also thinking about Stridsberg and Rosenberg—their writerly acts of resurrection and worship, of allyship and communion.

In imagining and/or writing Mary, Ellie is fixating on the lover—her own half of the equation. She's preserving and exalting the person who is usually in the shadows, widening the frame to include both the perceiver and the perceived, follower and deity, lover and beloved. In doing this, Ellie, and I, are taking emphasis away from the love object—who is, after all, interchangeable. Instead, Ellie is reaching towards this other version of herself, in solidarity and affection; she recognizes the strength, the beauty, the resilience, and the artistry in the devotion that she is performing, that they are both simultaneously performing. This communion is the act of love at the center of the novel, the engine that I have chosen.

Whenever I write, I am in a still room with these two women, Ellie and Mary, who are also versions of myself. We play out the same story, and there is no question of what will happen, or how things might turn out. The pain is inevitable, the beauty and the wonder that come with it. All three of us would do it all, all over again. So we do.