

His Crossing

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Abstract

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In memory, the family history, the events leading up to, and the aftermath looped in on themselves, like a spiroscope continuum. His suicide was the beginning, but also the middle, and the end. As one who would witness for the first time by recasting my memories, I realized that a death in the family influences all points on the continuum by causing a reconsideration of what was lived and what life is and what life will be. Variable, inconstant, death is always a loss. A suicide is loss that lives in hypotheticals. What if we...? What if he...? This isn't only about me. It's about what happens when a family cannot be. When what binds us is easily wrecked by illness, addiction, distance, and tragedy. A family who cannot translate meaning from one to another is not only incapable of communicating, it is divided. Like a railroad track that divides two communities, the broken language runs through and inhibits access, prohibits healing. Some members are left on one side, unable to make their way across to the other.

His Crossing

By Maria Delgado Stevens

–Dedication–

**My mother, a woman, a person, flawed
and perfect,**

We are survivors of the same wreckage.

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In this work I incorporate excerpts from my mother's original manuscript, *You'll Be Sorry*. My mother, Ann Miles, created a pseudonym for herself named Eve, which I also use along with the names she assigned to my brother and I.

Her son's first and last name

Pain was her son's first and last name:

Dream of strangers, blister of fame.

The place, a train *where dreams despair*

First and Last, her son was there.

That bitter conscience *high cloud after*

Another drink, daily disaster

A decade, mud and soot track and tomb

Everyday. High cloud afternoon.

(Italics excerpted from *You'll Be Sorry*.)

THE PERFORMANCE

Cast

Me -[N]arrator / Teresa

My mother - Eve Gates

My brother - Lee

Act I

The narrator is a character?

Pacing and gesturing. Yes.

A character, sewing with a delicate thread that fastens together kindred fabric, a gauzy offering —not structural, not binding.

N: She would have preferred this was a ballet.

A dark figure pacing on a dark stage.

N: *grimacing outward toward stage theater exits* I've been writing around and about the same event for months. Exhaustive attempts notwithstanding, they have always amounted to something stale, not even as exciting as a stalemate, in fact, more like stale bread. On initial consideration, enticing to consider, unexpected to experience.

The impetus. It exists, is vibrant and pulsating, genuine and yeasty. A death is a grand subject, no? Death in a family is the subject, yes? Yet, what ways can I write so that it is more than a gesture? More than an attempt?

Almost glib.

N: *asks the audience* What role does breadmaking play in a ballet?

During perpetual pacing, the dark figure comes across a tutu, prone and quivering, a moment passes when finally they decide to put it on—they continue pacing—continue gesturing.

I want! I. WANT!

What I want is to pierce, puncture, and tear a hole in the fabric of apathy! I don't just want to iron out pleats, I want to rip into shreds the pretty skirt I've worn (I'm wearing), tiptoeing around and about my brother's death.

Lighting slowly reveals another on stage. N will need to turn around and cross toward the other: a grown fetal body. Curious yet cautious, N is androgynous even in a skirt. Bewildered in impression, but stoic in expression—by the body—on the stage, they start to describe—and circumscribe—what they're feeling about the body—on the stage—they are narrating and processing.

N: Lean, a hint of olive, taut skin, a body on the stage, center-spot-lighted, crumpled, sinewed, his bare back to the audience, (*whispers*) they can't. See his face?

Looking out and beyond, again, N narrates a moment that complements, but contradicts, this moment. Frustrated, the tone begins as a condescension but ends with a hint of regret.

We're in a dance class. Wide open space, tall ceilings, floor to floor the windows—a cast of expansion and deliverance.

Adagio. My mother and I dance, a duet of changing leads, a partnership of reticent acceptance, active apathy. Pointed, she arabesques from the center into the shadows, a full-skirt kicked—jete into the wings. Her arms are an empty cradle anticipating her lead role.

First-position, planted heels, I bow. The audience and my breath and the lights dim.

I know what it is. Fluid contraction. So far my gestures feel like a farce—a pantomime. Where I should be leaping I am side-stepping, where I should melt into an embrace, my hands hover with indecision.

When my arms should sweep out-stretched the full length of my body, I have held them close, pathetic, and dripping.

A tiptoe is not a ballet.

Looking down at the body mass.

N: He was one before another (whom my mother aborted). She read tea leaves, the stars, and a stack of bills, predicting an existence. Double Sagittarius, energetic, foreboding. This kid, what will he be? She asked herself in a vintage glass hung on the wall of water-stained paper, scented with Newports and nailpolish.

Born on the syllable of a broken English birthday. A father who trades work for a half-breed puppy. Who trades work for a sometimes egg-laying hen. Will he be able to survive in the world? What world is he good for? Father, less and less useful. Good dancer, not quite good-for-nothing.

Love lyrics synth-warped into disco bards—lustful, demanding, and damaging. My parents wore matching purple, silver, red, and black to The Depot on Saturdays. On those housebound weekends, faintly aware that the 80s followed the 70s—they swapped marijuana for cocaine, swapped humble intellectualism for mediocre middle class.

N: Eventually, he was left behind.

A sister, I escaped to parties, to sleepovers, to a different state. My mother claims, “Teresa had had her bad days too but it hadn’t lasted long. The two kids had been like sun and rain, one serene and calm, the other dark and morose.”

(You’ll Be Sorry)

Bad days that worked themselves into typical teen and twenty angst, but my brother’s bad days sounded louder and louder—like an approaching train.

He was prone to obsession, collecting, defacing, and remarking. For example, he worshipped celebrities like Paris Hilton, claiming an uncanny intimacy because of her infamous sex tapes.

His email address was princeofamerica@yahoo.com, suitable for a standard, off-the-shelf, megalomaniac.

N: If his childhood was defined by a frown, his twenties were a scowl. He pissed people off: “Because, like the incorrigible child Lee had been no one knew how to handle him.”

(You’ll Be Sorry)

So, when he shaved and dyed his hair in a spotted leopard print, wore neck tattoos and chains, ripped shirts, holey jeans, and inked F-U-C-K on his right hand fingers, we decided he was artistic, never disturbed.

Handsome and haunted, a brother cast to play the ‘disorder’ role against players whose ‘function’ outplay their disease—status quo conformers who drench and stain every family portrait. He was not one of them. He was one dark side of America. A silver and black gelatin reflection cast in a mirror at the end of a long generational hallway.

My mother is right, his death is a tragedy, a subject, like him, “dark and morose,” and so deserves a performance much more than a tiptoe and leap across the stage. From the gut: visceral disgust, blind ignorance, denied anger. Our tired scars might just begin to heal. When cathartic movements transform a sympathy gesture into a forgiving embrace.

N: His final performance. It replays in my sleep, in my off hours. In my dreams. What led to his decision? What final damaging and sensory reality surrounded the end?

Backdrop, distant large faded city door, tall branchy trees, brown front yard slopes, brown, gray, dim city shapes, blurry yellow and green persons. The stage is clean of props except for a set of tracks running the full length, appearing from the right wing and disappearing into the left wing. Upstage and downstage, lighting accounts for all color—more gray than yellow, criss-crossed, thick, like a wall. It dissipates and reconstitutes like a curtain, replacing itself as Lee moves.

Scene 1

5:27pm, Thursday April 23, 2009

A train

N: He exits the front door and stops with his right hand on the bulky brass handle, feeling an icy crosstown breeze off Lake Michigan. It reminds him of where he is headed.

close distant sounds

He's not dressed for the weather, it's sunnier elsewhere down the street, but here the trees are tall, overgrown, and block the sun from the brown four-story brick building. The dilapidated sign staked in the sloping front indicates a decrepit institution. There is green down the road, but not here.

a horn, a warning

He releases the door and it muffles closed like the seal of a vacuum. He jumps down the cement steps, two by two. With intent consideration he takes a sharp right, inhaling deeply, his smile

strained, anticipating. The four lane boulevard ahead of him is clear of cars. He isn't looking anyway, he's looking ahead. At the slope leading upward to the tracks.

*horn, a warning, sounding, loud, a menacing, deeper than
the homes on either side*

The tracks are high up from the pedestrian sidewalk, a steep brambled slope, where a gap in the chainlink is barely visible. He can feel the cold pavement through his worn boots, he likes the slapping sound as he urges his legs to run faster.

*at a menacing speed, the ghost silhouette of a train crossing a road bridge, its wide metal face
bears a tall grated, silver grin, the engine moving smoothly down the tracks*

He is slower through the gap but picks up speed, *the horn blaring an extended note of
recognition and despair—the bold face METRA font runs along the rails* and longing to be done he plants his left foot, looks up and right toward a wide-eyed conductor shaking his head, and leaps.

*the sound screech, it drowns out the horn while the train brakes grind to a wavering halt. The
passengers lurch forward.*

That other day, when he left your cement stoop he crossed an
avenue loud with strangers.

A quay –he quit his noose, found
a body with unproud similarities.

Not good nor kind –he ran into himself.

Oh, he's such

a brilliant,
brooding sharp
with a bird
tattooed
on his neck.

Disgust at his reflection person—not fuming—an imagining.

Who is that??

no, no, Not him—

(he doesn't let him in.)

The Burial of the Dead

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.

The Waste Land by T.S. Eliot

Scene 2

5:31pm, Thursday April 23, 2009

His body is thrown, it lands against the chain, in the brambles, not far away from the train.

N: What insubstantial mess is this? The logistics of a train traveling at an important, enterprising speed must not be interfered with.

N stands over the body, near the tracks, close to center stage.

“I’m suffering,” he never said.

Suited Commuter sitting in Car 3, approximately 300 yards behind the impact, looks out over the single story cottages running right up against the line. He takes out his cellphone:

...shit, I'm going to be late...

...why kids r hungry...

...train is late, someone jumped the tracks

...oh...r u ok?...

...yeah, prbly some crazy person...sigh...

...sucks, old guy?....

...hard to tell, so tired of jumpers, I get their pain and all but the train is a shitty way to do it ya know, like people got to get home...

...yeah, I get it keep me updated

...k, I will...

Leisure Commuter sitting in Car 1, behind the engine, is having trouble breathing. She looks at the square head cushion of the seat in front of her...

...into my, *puff, puff*, expand inhaling? through... exhale through mouth...inhaling...exhaling...*inhale*...it's alright, they're okay (whoever they are) Whoever they were...exhale...*inhale*...hold, shit, this isn't helping....

Fancy Commuter sitting in Car 1, takes out their cellphone:

...running late...

...

...you there?...

. . .

...?...

The wall of light is pierced and closed, pierced and closed, around the commuters. His body is a distant mass, downstage now—stage right, troubling and close to the front row.

In unison, the commuters are a chorus who raise their heads up and away from their phones directly toward the audience. They look back at their devices, they look up and away; searching, they sit, grasp their seat, kick and flail. Their frustration is anyone's guess.

The distant mass discernible body is a strange enticing repulsion to look at the stranger.

Giddy sounds now from within the train as the chorus breaks into an emotional and incoherent babble. After their silence, they start talking to one another, at one another.

N: The sound of glasses clinking is unsettling, are they celebrating? On the train?



Act II

Scene 1

5:44pm, Thursday April 23, 2009

Stage right, a semicircle bar is full with customers, mainly men in their 50s-60s, in various stages of dying. One couple sits closely at the end of the bar. A female bartender is poised to pull a draft, she is distracted while a customer talks. She looks off and away over the audience. A scripted neon light above the bar blinks, “-ead Soldier” forgetting how to perform the “D” in dead.

An old, overworked, typewriter struggles from a dark stage left. Stacks of white paper, typed fonts filling every reasonable space, are piled precariously around a desk, on the verge of falling. Sheet by sheet, they leaf-fall descending to the stage.

A middle-aged female smoker's voice writes aloud, narrating the following excerpt. Rust and metal fill her voice when she reads her response to characters (they are her creation) as if these run-ins were mundane and still the bane of her existence. Eve begins:

Having a bad day already Evy?" He grinned but his wiry beard absorbed it.

The bar comes alive with movement, but not sound. Moving methodically, a tall woman whose shoulder length hair swings while she dances from customer to customer. The narrating voice is hers, amplified from a dark stage left. It sounds distant, metallic and hollow. None of the barflys acknowledge it. She reads from her manuscript:

"No," thought Eve, "Not till I saw your stupid face." "One of my squirrels was run over," she decided to say aloud and it was true. There had been a sad roadkill right by her street this not good for the squirrel morning.

"Squirrels are nothing. They're stupid animals. Poor survivors on the road."

Eve was a little taken aback by his statement, usually Tod was a lot kinder. Gary was looking as if he'd lost something when the bearded gentleman continued.

"You see them everyday. They run right in front of you."

"Do they now" Eve thought, again to herself. "And they're rats, Nobody likes rats." She muttered aloud.

"Right! Why does anybody like rats? They're ugly, diseased creatures."

"Why does anybody like anybody?" And then, "Listen, roadkill sucks. I feed those squirrels. I know it was one of mine."

"In that case, I'm sorry. I'll go by there and get it off the road for you. I can do that."

"I thought they were stupid, ignorant rats?"

N, standing near the wings, close to the bar, watches with childish interest the waitress serving her obligations. Both N and the waitress tuck a piece of hair behind their ear, one audience member gasps aloud with recognition at the significance of the act. Eve continues:

Tod smiled again. This time Eve could see it. "They're all God's creatures," he said.

Eve smiled too. That was more like it.

N whispering: (she loves animals.)

She was still trying to ignore the rat and squirrel death when lunch came around. People were coming in kinda thick today. The huge, wooden front door kept banging open-shut, and the paned glass with the steel arms side doors was doing the same. Eve was happy. She was making waitress money, and, the way it was going Lee and Eve could have a nice dinner out, like regular mothers and sons.

(You'll Be Sorry)

Initially, Eve's voice is even, unaffected, delivering. Tall and busy, the woman performs her job, but is distracted, glancing at the door with every new customer entrance.

A click is heard when all of a sudden a tall, lean body appears encased in a soft glow. The body sits over a typewriter which keys and dings loudly. Hunched over a lonely desk, she launches gusts of disappointment into the audience. They feel it sharp and cold on their wide, willing faces.

N could warn them, knowing what kind of pain this writer could inflict.

Yet, N still stands on the very far side of the stage near the wings anticipating a performance.

Unsure, their long limbs hang, flattening the tutu into a sad skirt.

Eve narrates, with an effort to lighten up she sings through the beginning. Her shoulders sway awkwardly, tapping feet occasionally point under her work table. Meanwhile the waitress pirouettes and halos in silent rings between and through obligations: As the voice dampens the waitress' steady pace slackens.

It was not quick and fast waitressing this day. It was methodical, orderly, quiet, like a regular late afternoon dinner. The thought of Lee by himself began to affect her like a bad shoe as the time went on but she had to work, she had to protect her livelihood, her day to day existence in this place. She could not, responsibly go home. She figured he understood this fact, that she had to work. Eve had matured and didn't deviate from course anymore. She had a couple of times in her life and it had ended up making her miserable as hell.

The problem was he had kept crying as he grew and she had kept trying to fix whatever was wrong in a manner which didn't benefit anyone.

(You'll Be Sorry)

The waitress stops in the center of the stage, near a tall bar table, forgets her apron and walks toward the door past customers who try to get her attention. The desk lamp clicks off. N, with back to the audience, bends and picks up some debris discarded by customers.

N –A dissatisfied

mouse (his younger self) ate

his lion's

share chances (of mother's affection)

silent product (wasted by-product)

muffled illness of

a mother a kind of mother

who by whom
would
lock him in (his room) and close him
out (of her heart).

Garbage pail kids
and confusion

lined his broken door and rotted
floor his
person a pollutant to
his affection, like a complicated
shade-knot.

The day the night the day the night the day the night the day the night
Exist, ing

without within—mustering strength to open—

Mother,
 You claimed
he followed
the directions
on the bottle
didn't mistake
the cap for a pill

Did possess
far more
control

than to cast himself a lead in a play about love.

N: *stage left. Slackened tutu and hunched shoulders.* I see her standing off to the side, the bar lights are dimming, car headlights in the distance. In her hands, on her hip, a heavy manuscript. She is headed toward decay.

N can't look away.

She moves as if on silent pause, her legs practically immobile, her keys in her pocket. She'll call him in a minute. A glance in the window reflects the mask of a weary woman struggling to hold onto too many items.

Eve snickers, understanding, but voices a defense:

She was busy making money. She was off her guard. *(You'll Be Sorry)*

N: *still watching her mother* Looking down, her manuscript is now a bulky purse, and with keys in hand she continues to look, until recognition spreads across her face. With a pace that is quick and deliberate, she heads back to the bar. Back through the door toward the dark light.

Lights go out at the bar except for the blinking neon sign. The voice of Eve inhales and exhales—in wavering recognition. Typewriter Eve sits at the end of the bar, far away from the audience.

Nevertheless, both women raise their head up and glance into the distance. From a surface on the bar, a phone lights up a chorus of frozen faces. The waitress walks plainly, methodically, crossing over. Her face is illuminated as she presses it to her ear.

SILENCE

Scene 2

6:23pm, Thursday April 23, 2009

N begins in a graceful port de bras —I'll hand it off to her. The voice of Eve returns, steady, narrating, the phone light illuminates her hands and face.

Seated Eve begins with a questioning tone

She got the call on her no sound cell phone at 6:23 pm. She had to really strain to hear anything the caller was telling her.

that becomes more and more frantic, as both Eves narrate the impossible experience:

A second later it registered in her brain she was speaking to the assistant social worker from The View. The man, Bob, she remembered his name. He was trying to tell her something was wrong with her Lee.

“They said they had a young man with tattoos on his neck,” poor Bob was saying to her.

“What happened?” then Eve screamed, “He’s dead!”

“We don’t know for sure if it’s him—”

She tried to believe it wasn’t Lee but she knew he had it in him to do this. She started to scream without conscience, to scream like an idiot.

All bodies on stage collapse, from standing, sitting, reaching, retracting, drinking—a fused being synchronized in a fatal-faint-fall.

All, except the voice of seated Eve and waitress Eve. They are left on a stage empty of human movement. From each position they will briefly turn and face each other without seeing one another.

They hold the phone and grab a menu off the bar.

Eve, close to the door, grabs her purse from the floor, muttering loudly:

“You are a walking tragedy. You will lose the one closest to you.” Eve had ignored it like any strong minded person and forgotten about the witchy Hispanic woman from a dive bar in uptown Manhattan. Now it burned a flame in her like the giant setting sun.

(You'll Be Sorry)

N can't get a tune out of their head, starts wandering the stage looking for a mirror which hangs far stage left, practically invisible to the center audience. They look like they're ready to exit, but the mirror reflection stops them and without breaking their gaze they start to apply makeup from an open palette with their bare hands.

Dim lights from underneath the bar exaggerate the bodies on stage, no one is moving. The waitress puts down the phone and slowly takes off her black apron, winds the long straps around the tightly folded roll. After placing it on the bar; she walks out past incoming customers.

In chorus everyone looks up, hands on the stage floor; raising their torso, they watch her leave. Only one daft gentleman tries to take advantage of the prone bodies by reaching over to fondle the bartender.

Lights are brown, gray, and purple.

Each customer takes a piece of the set and walks off stage with it. The large bar parts wheel off stage easily. The wheels on the stage sound similar to a train on eternal tracks—a pattern of expectation, acceptance, and forgiveness. The young man in the audience dips his head and stares at closed hands. A dark open space is left next to a glint of metal.

N gestures to the exodus of stage people but does not offer assistance. They sit in a pretty position on the floor for much longer than anyone is really comfortable. Makeup and mirror to their side. Their gaze is focused on a crumpled figure up against a sharp divide.

Briefly, a cold thin light shows a chain link fence with a barely perceptible gap. Left and right are divided. Lights go out.

SILENCE



THE REHEARSAL

The stage is dark and quiet, the audience breathes in anticipation. The empty stage distresses them. The curtain never closes.

A large screen begins its descent. A chain-link fence divides the space, a crumpled mass assumed to be the body is so still it's as if the stage will consume it.

N is posed down stage, front and center—eerily close to the edge, now with books loose under their left arm, and one open in their right hand. The tutu has snagged so that a piece hangs like a tail. Ignoring the fence, the crumpled mass, the screen, they scuffle slowly across the old stage floor—wilting. The open book arm falls to their side.

The screen is colorful, a fall garden. A photograph of a young mother holding a small child by the hand. She is leaping over a pile of leaves, her too wide smile is disconcerting, the child's face is hidden.

The book drops. N address the audience.

N: I knew she was different when she leapt sidewalk cracks two by two to the bus stop dragging my little feet along.

I knew she was different when I said I had homework but she said you have to go to ballet.

I knew she was different when she grabbed my thin white arm and told me to watch out for him.

I knew she was different when she flicked off a passing cop who stared into our white Escort.

I knew she was different when she said the raccoons were visiting her, again.

I knew she was different when she told me –get out, get the fuck out!

I knew she was different every time someone asked who's my mom and when I told them, made a surprised and curious O.

Eve, narrates from the right wing. Regret, guilt, and sadness make it difficult. She remembers:

The beige paint on the windows in many spots was beginning to peel. Everything was now, like the paint, crumbling around her. She was watching it warp, as little Lee had watched her from the recesses of his childhood room.

(You'll Be Sorry)

N –Don't you remember

your escapes

screams awake?

Your restless scissors stab, stab, stabbing a hundred

helpless hopes?

If pierce and

stabbed a crayola wall

became faded paper

and eyes

direct-pierced that

eager, wounded balloon—

that was you.

Might you have stepped

down

into a breath-held

space.

I remember,

you might remember,

you cried.

You always cried.

Leans over and picks back up the fallen book.

N: In the 80s, the old people's house smelled like an old paperback with worn and discontent pages. Yellow, stiff, pulp and ink bound their story. Swollen in the humid den, shoved between two ledgers on a dusty bookcase, they existed in a timeless space, more old than new, more ancient than present.

Dadpo's leather chair and transistor radio amplified the Cubs' game throughout the summer months. The chair, the body and radio were one. His ancient skeleton barely held up his old skin, made a caricature by the daily-worn flannel, dirty trousers, and dark blue suspenders. At the peak of the midwestern summer, when humidity and heat plotted to strangle breathing folk, Dadpo would hold a rusty blade in his shaking hands and gracefully dig the dirt out from underneath his yellow fingernails.

"Hot 'nough for ya?" he would chuckle aloud in the empty room. Then, his stubbled and slack jaw developed a slow-motion half-grin turned grimace while he looked down at his shaking hands.

His hands trembled. Only a nap could quiet them. They seemed to have a will of their own, especially at the dinner table when Grandma plopped greasy steaks off a hot sheet pan onto his plate, splattering us all.

His hands menaced him as a perpetual reminder of age and helplessness. When he grabbed the wooden cane to swing at the troubled child, he knocked it down rather than grasp it. The grandchildren knew Dadpo's hands were on their side—even if his mind and body were not.

N: Grandma's dark peppered curls are still vibrant, she wears a red, short-sleeved, sweater shirt, and over-the-knee navy skirt, stiff from ironing. Her old lady stockings sag at her ankles. Her back is hunched and her head protrudes forward, making it difficult for her to look up. Josephine has a Slavic face. Large, thin nose, dark eyes and lashes, reddish skin and wrinkles. Her resting face is sweet, naive, almost youthful. But she is too anxious and so, perpetually furrows her brow in response to daily life.

Right now, she runs scalding hot water from the tap in the sink rinsing yesterday's silver. The steamy clatter is loud. She turns her head to the left hollering without opening her mouth very wide.

N voices the old married pair, imagining a scene that likely occurred on multiple occasions in the Fairview house. The narration is a bit comical, only inasmuch as N attempts the dialogue. Grandma Josephine has a voice that is raspy, with occasional high pitches, Dadpo's mouth opens as if to be loud, but is low, gruff, and sometimes barely perceptible.

Grandma Josephine: DADPO!

Dadpo: *[lifts his head]* Grapefruit!

Grandma Josephine: DADPO! What time is it!?

Dadpo: *[hearing half the question, sticks with his first response]* Grapefruit n' pear! Can's okay!

Grandma Josephine: *[realizes he's filling in again – is tired of it, but softens a bit. Still, mixing the silver in the hot tub.]* Dadpo, we need to talk to the kids about their mother.

Dadpo: *[looks bewildered, hears clatter, uncertain, tries to figure it out]* WHAAT!?

Grandma Josephine: *[Talks to the silver]* We need to talk to 'em. They have to hear it from us.

Dadpo: *[looks resigned now, he's clearly heard, doesn't want to respond, stares at his right hand, watching its betrayal.]* Wha' for? Tha's her job, Jo. She's the one who screwed it all up.

[Josephine walks through the small kitchen, past the old table, to the shallow door frame.

Dadpo's chair is to the right. This is his den, the Cubs' game is muted on the right arm AM radio. An old fish tank is opposite his chair yet empty of fish and water. It still has a purple light that cast across Dadpo's corner making him look ghoulish.]

Grandma Josephine: *[holds a dish towel and a handful of silver]* It's not her fault. You know it's not her fault. She's gone strange is all.

Dadpo: Well, it's somebody's fault. Who, then?? *[He looks up and challenges his wife. His hand stops shaking and they both glance at it. He grasps that hand with his other in an attempt to maintain control.]*

Grandma Josephine: [*meek, turning away, the dish towel hanging from her right hand*] Not sure.
Hard to know who to blame.



Eve shouts defensively from the right wing. The audience strains to hear her.

Everyone was fed and clean, but she had not been working. She had been terrified to call the family for fear of being sent home and losing her house.

(You'll Be Sorry)

N: We don't have photographs for times that stay like a stain, in our blood, on our brains. I don't have a picture of fluff-pink slippers separate from each other on the floor, on the driveway, on the sidewalk, in the street.

I only have a mind-shot of feet, one of them pink-slipped, running. I see them moving, alternating, running away, around the block, across a curb, a bulk of green to the left, corners of someone's porch, roots on the path.

N: I'm running to nowhere. I'm a block over, the mass of blue bodies have captured and held her.

Her black mask, once an item of contrivance, then convenience, now necessity, is labeled and filed. With her away, far, far away, beyond green pastures, beyond a rainbow, beyond the deep blue sea; her black mask is now a part of her white body, and forces a contortion that can never be normal. That is hard to watch on stage, that is irregular—frightening.

Black Masked

And speak of the devil
he always says a lot of things

[like]

I never touched her
claims I hit her
all on purpose
black masked

“Hi”

I heard that

“Huh?”

Dying from
daily death disease
Need an alibi

Nearby city
green dollar factor[y]
Power of attorney
she couldn't deliver
rebuke from
shot off
dial the hyena
with the
black mask on.

blame - blame - blame

He and they were out to get you.

Another, he might have
snuck into your panties
when you were young and trusting,
his mask was handsome,
your mask wanting

And that's how it goes.

Classic rock storytime,
they match you to a loser,
you run away
and find your own
epic journey.

N completes an unfinished thought

N: They captured and held her. Institutionalized into a predictable citizen-existence with a file. They can hold a file, like a photograph, a file is for seeing and holding. They see and hold her in their file.

Eve's voice sounds desperate to be done with the telling:

She'd needed a cigarette, she'd been a heavy smoker at the time. When the 'are you de-press-ed?' doctor had retreated to destroy someone else she'd gone to locate one. She'd somehow seemed to glide her hundred and ten cocaine skeleton out of the unlocked room door and into the 'Day Room.'

(You'll Be Sorry)

N: My mother was filed away in an upstate institution. I was told I could keep my pet mice. My brother and I boarded a plane to Chicago, unlike previous times, this was a one-way trip.

Dadpo still sat in an old leather chair, sitting on peeling duct tape. The Cubs' game on an old radio, he dozed, a hard wooden cane steady against his knee, where he could easily grab it.

Many more mice lived in an upgraded enclosure. Instead of cleaning their bedding, I sprinkled baby powder over it to mask the smell. They began to escape.

"I better not catch those rodents," Dadpo would mutter when I walked by him, his blue and gray wrinkled hand threatening me by making a fist in his lap. His shaking hands, a mad-tremble, worse off with this effort.

N: Born in 1901, he built the house we lived in. Mice were rodents, never pets. You cleaned your plate. Children were a nuisance, especially a daughter's children, now that they were always in his house. The youngest, Lee, was always underfoot.

“Your grandfather will whack one with his cane if he sees it. He better not see it,” Grandma Josephine kindly threatened.

Most days, Dadpo sat and sat. My little brother would run through the den past the old man.

Most days, he managed to avoid the wild swing of the cane.

N, a dramatic performance walk, they cross the stage back and forth stopping to consider the body by the fence. The tutu has regained some life.

N: The old people were gone. Eve had nursed them across a permanent passing. She bathed, fed, and medicated their ailing bodies in the house she grew up in—until they were one and then none. With her daughter moved out years earlier, and her son occupying her brother’s old room.

Eve put it off though. Her cats were used to the small cot against the big window. They would sit on a third of it without minding her splayed and restless body. They were certain she was a deformed cat, unable to curl her awkward limbs into a proper ball.

Her brother was in charge of her money. She was institutionalized twice, in both cases her kids were at risk; her parents had to become their guardians so she could continue to even live in the same house as them. Eve’s brother was tall and silent, a longtime lawyer at a downtown Chicago firm. He wasn’t entitled, but perpetually assuming when it came to her. His successes amplified her failures.

N: She dated. The broad-shouldered blonde with a funny grin who frequented the bar and wore more than just t-shirts and jeans asked her out and courted her like they were in high school. Eve liked his awkward sense of humor and tolerated his conservative short-comings. When her parents passed Eve saw him filling up the empty parts of the house with his suburban tastes and hippie leanings.

Lee despised him. Not only was he a “pathetic loser,” he was also competition, and Lee could sense that he was being replaced.

Eve steps out from the wings with a familiar phone light to her face:

Wha-at? I don't know. He's alive, yes. He's right here. They're coming!"
She directed at really miserable now Lee. She'd still been on the phone.
“What did you try to do? Hang yourself? From the pipe?” Eve had been
pissed as hell. Take out the heating system in December. Great. “With
what?” She was still screaming, totally overreacting as was her way.

“My belt.”

Now they were both miserable.

(You'll Be Sorry)

N: Is a suicide failure worse than a suicide success? Does it color regret into a doughy substance that the victim is forced to swallow?

Is it possible not to choke? Like a viscous jelly, on the palette, it burns the lungs, damages the throat.

Makes it hard to speak.

N: And be spoken to.

A bellowing horn—a distance away—still threatens the stage.

The screen colors to the same young woman now directing a side smile down at a little boy standing by her feet. His pleading face and small arms. He desperately wants to bury his head into her warm shoulder.

I spoke to him less and less, carefully minding my own living, cautiously walking the edge, mindful that death wasn't forgiving.

N: We have so few photographs of him. I can only recall one when he was a child, frowning at my mother, the photographer, who posed her daughter wearing a blue ballet leotard, standing on half-point, arms in a high fifth position. Lee, a mere four-year-old, a bowl haircut bob, a thick brow, and a dark frown, “why do I have to take this picture?!” I am compliant, he is defiant.

A fond capture of a family on the verge of collapse.



N: A mother is a delicate subject. A subject worthy of substantial pause. A mother body, if reproached or celebrated, is a body for the purpose of creation. If broken, where does that leave the created. Is it absorbed, or flung from the nest?

lap

trace forward sitting, reclined
a space to place
a nest to protect
to rest

what letters make a lap
what letters a lap make
that soothe
that sleep
(as in a sleeping cat)
(or an open book)
(or the soft fold)
of ancient hands

a chair is a seat, is a lap

the woman's form
suggestive lap
even while standing
her carriage her hips and waist
a nest for imminent life

what letters form that shape?

Attracted to the shape that is the woman that is the nest that is life.

N: What is it about a woman who bewitches a man? What is it about a person who can send such signals that another is mesmerized, beyond a real sense of knowing, understanding, and control?

I think I have some understanding of what it must be like to enchant another. Though I have never felt the pull of such a magnetic person except for one.

At a very young age, I fell in love with my mother as one who was entirely separate from myself, attractive, impulsive, joyful, energetic, and creative.

I remember watching her from the backseat of an old red Mustang. Watching her handle the dial on the radio, and beat out rhythms of music now considered “classic.” Then, it was the soundtrack to my childhood, stored in a brown leather satchel with a long beaded fringe.

My mother’s favorite drum was her steering wheel. My detailed memories are of my mother driving. Is this a Western experience? Mothers in cars, closer than in a home—in a home they disappear into the kitchen, the bathroom, the bedroom.

N: In a home. Mothers at home. My mother started at her mother’s home. Grandma Josephine was a woman who spent most of her time in the kitchen, never got her driver’s license, never took long walks in the neighborhood, never strayed far. From home.

My mother left her mother’s home often. She reveled in independence, and the very sense of avoiding her mother’s example. Eventually she went far, far from home.

Cars allow a woman independence. My mother driving. Driving us everywhere.

N: I only have one faint memory of my father driving home from a beach in New Jersey, when it was raining, when he hit a possum crossing the road. He had to hit it because of traffic. He said.

My infatuation with my mother started early. I would sneak into her lavender closet and try on her shoes. A small window filtered light and dust warmed her hanging clothes.

Misplaced items, door ajar, a dress strap clinging to a hanger. She never said a word about the invader. Her strappy heels out of the box abandoned on the wooden floor.

Where do father's belong? The screen colors into a dark-skinned man standing outside holding a white coffee cup. Steam from the cup blends with his exhaled breath. He stares directly at the audience.

1973, Manhattan, NYC

N: Papi, where was that basement apartment? Was it in Manhattan? I know my birth certificate said I was born in the city borough. It rained and rained and water ran down the stairs into our home. You balanced the heavy mattress on your head in order to move it down the street, to another place, a dry place. You did all of this while mom was in the hospital, giving birth to me, struggling with her first birth.

It was summer and despite the rain, it must have been warm, muggy. The smell of the streets would have wafted into the wet apartment. Rain and sweat would have stained your shirt as you struggled with the mattress. She was 21 years old, she would turn 22 thirteen days later. In your separate existence, the smell of birth, and the smell of sweat, the smell of coffee, and the smell of the city streets.

Papi, remove the damp. Sweep up a hard cement floor and lay the old blue rug on it. Place the mattress down, check for wet spots. Pull the fitted sheet over the corners, spread out the worn comforter. The cats will enter the new space and run into dark corners.

N: Again, but I don't remember, I was too little. I remember what you have told me. The many times you have told me.

“Booba,” you say in a deep broken English “my love, my only love. My daughter.” You say. “I remember the day you were born. It was raining. The basement apartment was flooding. Man, it was crazy, the rain.” Your voice is in my head, a desperate intimacy. I might hold the phone away from my ear. I might lean against my dresser. I’m trapped in my room because if I move too far I’ll lose a signal. I most certainly slouch, hearing this story again.

The birth of a white daughter. The only of five children from three women who still answers your calls.



N: I am the pedestal daughter. Placed on a pedestal, demanded to reach down and haul your body up to me. Except, I slouch, burdened by your romantic grasping. I want the memories, but not the responsibility. “Papi,” is as far as I get in these ‘conversations.’ This one is more

pleasant, I like this story. More often, I get frustrated by the indulgent rambling that loops into dizzy circles. That spinning of an ego, wound up by a manic life.

I try. I try to stay present.

(It's the distance that protects me, why would I ever give that up?)

“Booba, I carried the mattress to a new apartment. I found a place down the street, and I carried the mattress on my head the whole way. Your mom was in the hospital. I didn't want you to come to a home under water.”

N: I can only imagine how much you wanted her once you met her.

How much she meant escape.

You were married, with two children, to an older woman.

You watched the television.

You walked down the street watching New York people.

You listened to the radio, went into bars, heard hippie music.

You saw her long-hair, short skirt, full lips and freckles.

Midwestern smile, your Caribbean hands reached for the moon.

N stops pacing the stage. This whole time, words are preceded by blurry images on the large screen. A family in whispers. A poignant America. The image now is of a white, two-story house, with red shutters. Tall green trees line the front, concealing a dark porch. A long gravel driveway with purple and white crocuses runs from the front-facing left all the way to the back beyond the structure, out of sight.

The image whitens N's face. Bright enough to light up the stage. Bisecting the image is the fence, on the stage, the crumpled mass lying on the left, immediately up against it.

N walks over, kneels down in a curtsy, and gently pats the head of the dark crumpled person, now a length of death, fragile and feminine, a soft vase on its side.

N steps out of the tutu abandoning it in the middle of the stage.

A breathless white house with red shutters and a shock of red roses lining the backyard fence pulses back onto the screen. Briefly it is alive and vibrant, but quickly fades.

N: *crouching by the body, looking up at the screen* I miss that house. The tire swing, the snowdrops, the red shutters. A home that gave us permission to be a family.

We held our breath and then lived without apology down a gravel driveway, eating undercooked hot dogs, avoiding hungry neighbors on humid nights.

Parts of ‘we’ still remain, but we are no longer a family.

On days when the floor isn’t swept, the counters are covered with crumbs, the laundry is overflowing. A home waits, patient for time, giving permission to excesses, forgiving forgetfulness.

The Grove Street house waited for us to arrive and worries about us now that we’re gone. Its painted tears are taffy wrappers stuffed between a mattress and the wall.

N: There’s never enough time to remember the two-story house, white with red shutters. Red shutters with carved crescent moons, climbing red roses sweeping along the long backyard fence. Sad little snowdrops littering the side yard under a bedroom window.

A small boy with disheveled brown hair crayoning over paint in broad strokes over and over and over. A manic instrument crying from behind his mother’s wall, a sister lost in a book, a father muttering from underneath a broken car.

The screen slowly moves up into the rafters. The last image is a blur of framed objects

a pipe

a book

a tire swing

a red rose

a snowdrop

a saxophone

a broken blue crayon

The curtain drops.



OFF STAGE

The audience, settling in for a longer night, pull snacks from pockets and bags. Some look toward the exits, up to the concert ceilings, the uncertainty concerns them. The stage is dark. Sleep smells like warm bodies in midst disoriented dreams.

The curtain is still. At intervals a hallowed whisper swells from the past and is heard by the very old, who are too young to recognize its origin.

Both Eve and Teresa didn't know what to say to the strangers who had known of Lee's death before his mother and sister. *(You'll Be Sorry)*

N: *humming* "I'm all lost in a supermarket—

I no longer can live happily—

I came in here for that special offer—

A guaranteed personality”

Strange is a stranger as unknown as an intrigue, yet so unknown that it becomes known becomes a known becomes a form filled spilled spelled into a shell once transparent now brimming with an unknown known familiar strange strength that dominates the brain space occupied with threatening whispers “weak stranger!” —a known weakness—an outsider—a weak translation of the self

if outside of then a stranger to

Grasp their stiff fingers stiff and wide eyes shocked with realization recognize inhabit he is outside of himself now a stranger to a once familiar flesh body force into an objective voyeuristic watching a stranger role-play his part the play apart from

Strange-ease in role play doesn’t erase the intrigue the delight the ambition to play this stranger well

“A guaranteed personality”

(The Clash)

She wrote, He made her feel confused and wrong, as he often did. *(You’ll Be Sorry)*

Confusion in recognition wrong in realization that stranger is her son. The distance an arm’s length between planets. His worries a galaxy of pin-pricked stars all falling out of a disappointed sky.

He occupied objective space. So separate it was confusing for us all. His blind resistance. Told to fold this corner to that to find final subject—does he do his daily swallow from plastic to wide open mouth? Fold this corner to that balance on knee hold water glass spill not and pour into his closed mouth. Nevermind how much spills how does he return to subjectivity? Will he recover his essence? Is his skin just a sleeve?

He is a Martian, raised from space dust, filled with child worry, furrowed into being like a long bushy brow. The subjective self needs time to reincorporate

the disparate parts are estranged glaciers puddled from meteorite attempts the hole the
whole a shell a sleeve empty worn and suffering at a word the word is Love he
never hears it because we never say it we lick our wounds melting away the insignificance
of our hurt

so he hurts Hurts a stranger a foreign familiar with strength from thirsted worry lust
that he is danger

embodied now in strange flesh violence he hurts the stranger his hurt wrecked on a wretch

She wondered, over and over

He made her feel confused and wrong

wrong thinking mind to include himself in this act.

(You'll Be Sorry)

N finds a shadow. They lie down and cradle the fetal mass. The fence silently retracts from center, getting smaller and more insignificant as it retreats.

An awkward muffled mic startles some of the audience awake, but only for a brief moment. They see the silent curtain and fall back asleep.

Three deep and steady breaths meditate out across the stage, under the dropped curtain, finding their way upward aisles out of closed doors—out of the house—into the unpredictable breathing world.

His Crossing

In midst, the body suffers, inflection is ascendance—

power resides and ‘three deep breaths’ underscore a desire to live.

But what version of living is self-loathing?

The kind that ends in death, the kind that leaves liquid sadness at the bottom of a cup, a bitter and compulsive finish.

Once upon a time...

She carried a soft shell, supple and sparkling, an egg that if left in its mother’s womb would kill her. She carried it to him, his body, a wreck beside a train stopped in midst his wanting, his haunting of tracks, dreams and screams, where he imagined his odd body out—

out of privilege, out of patience, out of time.

Ahead, metal bone and sinewy mesh made
a bridge of permanent crossing.

Where to? Mapped on a stranger’s skin long ago, it became familiar once she realized that destination and ascendance made space for an unusual outcast.

It had been no miscalculation—

his soul was

broken, his body not, yet

broken held a spirit, trapped

in midst

a transformation

and he hurried toward infinite tracks

he hurried along—to a middle, containing.

A middle enduring a contained skin
a vile veil so thin it hardly endured such a black mask of deceit—paralyzed and absurd.
I'm worn out (he says) and willing to suck on swollen futures to drain them.

I suspect (he says) the bridge is calling me to cross and lay my body down
to become another worth trespass—a worthy unworthy good.

A duality of fur and feathers (that paw and caw), it'll be enough to carry me
past the deception of wellness, through the transformation of loathsome
beginnings.

This stranger can't hold me if I suffocate its dreadful mouth
(he says).

No solitary expression can undo the feathered mask, a smile of despair
is tempting. The broken body—
the plot is a stain of impure colors—
it colors, with every prescription, it coaxes from the middle of a softly
opened hand, causing one to wander in circles.

The middle is average. Lost. A stranger.

I refuse to be average.

Take deformity, imagine it a transgression, a curse of escape, a distraction, a ploy (to escape pink
flesh).

In fact, it was always just a part of me in midst. (he admits)

What am I without the mask?

I am a welcomed exposure of raw and brittle tissue and bone. Drained of a soul, I become a speckless filament free to influence the remotest and most precarious being.

Don't lament my lost soul, mother,
I'm cast out of that ambiguous shell.

It'll take a sharper tool than your painted nails to excise your black mask.
Crack it and

I'll expose you. Like a leftover scent. Shudder your monstrous
desires, I'll remember you (he says).

Hand over hand, knees now on gravel, I climb
toward the bridge of beginnings. Without prescience,
they stand over my dissolving. I only look back once.
I see them reach down into the pitch to scoop up the soft stained ground.
It won't matter, eventually, I'll fly over their quiet casements.

The nest is huge sister, it contains so much more than we imagined.

Wet, as if licked by a mother's tongue, the membrane holds me until my fur and feathers fill in.
She'll pinch grasp to slowly peel it away. Innocent, my small dark iris, my brain exposed to the
filtering light.

She wants me to fly, I can only waddle on bird feet like dusty wrinkled hands.

Notes and Acknowledgements

Eliot, Thomas Stearns. *The Waste Land*. New York: Horace Liveright, 1922; Bartleby.com, 2011. www.bartleby.com/201/1.html#1-7. Date of Access: 1 April 2022.

I've taught high school English since 2002 and for many years when I taught AP Language and Composition, I would pair *The Great Gatsby* with Eliot's piece for obvious connections between "the Valley of Ashes," which was inspired by "the wasteland." We were in the middle of the unit one day when my mother called exclaiming in my ear, "he's dead! He's Dead!"

The poem begins, "April is the cruellest month, breeding." April was in full bloom, promising a wonderful summer. If my brother was dead, what life would grow from it?

Miles, Ann. *You'll Be Sorry*. 23 April 2010.

My mother is a writer. Writing since I was young, calling attention to the fact of her proclaimed identity with every facet of her existence. She knows herself as such and even if she has never published, her writing lives large in the sphere of our life.

Her manuscript follows her through the months leading up to his suicide. Waiting tables, managing her creative life, taking her medication, trying to convince her son to take his.

It was important that I maintain the efficacy of her text. Her voice is distinctly different from typical stage speech, it is clearly from a manuscript combining third person description and dialogue. By embedding it in [N]arrative's speech an unsettling presence haunts the text as well as the stage, a bit like a voice from out of the past.

The Clash. "Lost in the Supermarket." *CBS Records*, 1979. *Youtube Music* app.

My brother was a punk. Despite being half white, half Puerto Rican, he worshiped my mother's father's Welsh roots. He imagined himself more aligned with an Anglo history than a Boricuas

one. While I listened to new wave, industrial, and grunge, he defaulted to East Coast punk, hoping one day to move to New York and start a band.

Photographs embedded in the text are entirely original. The photo of the woman blowing dandelions is my mother, likely taken by my father. And, the photo of my father holding me as an infant was likely taken by my mother. He is standing in front of his original painting. I took the ones of the mural and train tracks a few days after his suicide. We tried to gauge where it happened. We wandered about the streets for hours, trying to make sense of his actions.

In acknowledgement of

Jeanne Heuvig, you were such a good match as an advisor. You balance listening, guidance, and facilitation with grace. As a fellow teacher, I always felt respected, as an MFA student, I always felt supported. Thank you.

Sage Stevens, my best friend and moral compass, the father of our children, and way better parent. In a recent request from the high school newspaper about balancing work and home life, I ended up writing way more about you than myself. Why? Because you're fucking awesome and I'm the luckiest person to have you by my side.

My children, Te, Josie, Miles, and Chase, thanks for allowing me to be Momma and also Maria. It took me a long time to see my mother as a person separate from her role as a care-giver, but I always feel like I can be my real self with you. I love you.

Narrator Witness, A Poetics Statement

Introduction

On April 23rd, 2009, my brother jumped in front of a northbound commuter train running out of the city of Chicago; he would have turned 30 in December. He had grown up in Glenview, a Northshore suburb. In his 20s, he lived in a government run facility in the urban neighborhood of Roger's Park.

I learned about his suicide from my mother, whose desperate phone call I received when I was in the middle of teaching an 11th grade English class at Santa Monica High School, in California. As much as the call disturbed me, it was not a surprise. What has lingered is the sensation of distance between my physical experience and the tragic event. The distance, at first was spatial, and now with 13 years past, the distance is also temporal. Regardless, I remember. I feel the memory in my body. Even as I struggle to put words to it.

Remembering is not the same as witnessing. Witnessing with your open eyes and mouth—an event, a person, a captured mood—is not the same as a memory. As a witness you are a victim to a future haunting impression that with a Titan's strength handcuffs you to an unwanted and helpless, weighted feeling. At the same time, a witness becomes a care-taker of the event and the persons involved in the event. By inserting myself into the role of witness, my previous defenses had to be cast off, leaving me exposed and vulnerable, but also open and present.

Upon returning to my brother's suicide, I realized it required intimacy, a deliberate move from memory to witness. From a self-centered sense of the effect of his death on my person, to

a play-by-play bystander, caught in an unfolding event. Like a paralyzed and mute visitor to the past, I am, I was, I have always been helpless to prevent his crossing.

My poetics starts with memory. Much of what I wrote when I started this project were identity memories. Glimpses of my past, colored in with images and emotions. What I mean is that they were experiences that likely shaped my sense of self. My sense of priorities, my will over reason, my take it or leave it sense of how I present and continue in the world of human beings. However, when it came time to write about my brother's death I distinctly felt the limitations of my singular perspective.

So, in order to create a pronounced and generous character, I had to match memory to witness and complement it with a voice I couldn't invent—my mother's manuscript, *You'll Be Sorry*. Attempts to write without her unpublished voice left too much room for supposition. That is, without my mother's version of events detailed in her manuscript, I knew I would be tempted to fill in blank spaces with my long-distance interpretation of what occurred in the months, days, and hours leading up to his suicide. I wanted to move beyond gesture, beyond indulgent grief, and attempt a recreation of perspectives. My mother, through her creation "Eve," was the most authentic perspective I could access.

The effect held me for many weeks. With every draft I struggled to convey how my narrator was caught up in realizing what had occurred, what emotional script was written on my memory. It was visual, bold, and haunting. But also stationary, locked in a particular time and space. I knew one of my goals would be to attempt to unlock, release his temporal death from his confused life, so that he could become something more, something eternal.

Still, I watched myself type reincorporated feelings matched to fleeting images. It was a good place to start. What is memory, though, but an impression of a feeling in a moment told through a smudged window? An impression, an outline of a memory, colored in with emotion. I needed to animate the narrative beyond an implied still-life. Even if, as an imaginary witness,

certain memories were tinged by grief and regret they could still become anchor points in a portrait with depth, dimension, and consciousness.

“You’ll Be Sorry”

I tried to preserve the excerpts from my mother’s manuscript so that her voice is her own as she intended. It is an act of respect as much as it is an attempt to fold her real experience into the telling of the death of her son. In print, it is blocked and set off from the rest of the text. I have not edited her words at all, even when style, grammar, or usage are awkward. I even keep her character names for us: I am Teresa, she is Eve Gates, my brother is Lee.

For years we have talked about her writing. Two decades ago, she sent me a physical manuscript, which I immediately put away because of my fear to read about her perspective on our family. I knew she was writing about our life. Her time as a young mother, one whose naivete and recklessness put her family at risk. A woman who never matched my friend’s mothers and who didn’t seem to care. I didn’t want to resent the person she had been. Finally, I decided to work with her recent manuscript (thankfully in digital form); when I asked, I did so knowing that I would still experience a tinge of resentment. Only now, I accept it as part of the person who is my mother, rather than the failure of a mother.

When I asked for permission to excerpt from her unpublished work, she gave me total freedom, but her willingness to be included in my project seemed capricious and I was wary of tampering with what had been a long writing process. Her manuscript is a living memorial, commemorating her son, but also grieving for the man he could have been. Her pain is in her pages.

I encountered obstacles, as well, originating from my emotional discomfort with the subject. Initially, before [N]arrator, I excerpted convenient passages that matched my preformed ideas and responded with my own prose and poetry; in another draft, I isolated small phrases and loaded language and wrote the excerpts into my original prose. Each time felt forced. I

was aware that I was manipulating her writing to suit my own purpose. Essentially, given the small question of “would I want to share this with her,” my imagined response was always “absolutely not.” And, so I worked to create a project that respected my unique mother—a hardworking, bipolar, single mother who has survived countless disappointments and is still an amazing and creative person. In a way, she became my most important audience

My current project still isolates excerpts from her work and removes them from her writing, but does so in a way that offers context bound to situations and characters from her story. Additionally, I try to create a persona that matches the autobiographical character she created for herself. It is imperfect, and most readers won’t know the difference, but I feel confident that my mother will agree with my choices and most importantly, will feel that the character depiction, although literary, is not exaggerated or demeaning.

Witness

The events of my brother’s death, the missed opportunities to anticipate, to interrupt, or to prevent it would be told through the eyes of an intimate lens. It was important that I took time with how this piece was presented to an outside audience—simply because a lot of it was inside, is inside, me.

The prism I held our story up to refracted three distinct personalities, which create the “Cast” of characters. In a way, we once were whole, a unit, a full portion of one story, until he jumped and broke us up into three separate parts.

The original actors are my family. If presented in a linear timeline then the relationship of the characters to the subject would shift considerably. Rigid and exacting, like plotting a point on a line. Any point in time could be labeled with an event. Events in time are often recorded on a line. However, for me it was not a single event, but rather a leading up to, a recovering from, an imagining—what if.

In memory, the family history, the events leading up to, and the aftermath looped in on themselves, like a spiroscope continuum. His suicide was the beginning, but also the middle, and the end. As one who would witness for the first time by recasting my memories, I realized that a death in the family influences all points on the continuum by causing a reconsideration of what was lived and what life is and what life will be. Variable, inconstant, death is always a loss. A suicide is loss that lives in hypotheticals. What if we...? What if he...?

This thesis isn't only about me. It's about what happens when a family cannot be. When what binds us is easily wrecked by illness, addiction, distance, and tragedy. A family who cannot translate meaning from one to another is not only incapable of communicating, it is divided. Like a railroad track that divides two communities, the broken language runs through and inhibits access, prohibits healing. Some members are left on one side, unable to make their way across to the other.

Onto the Stage

After several attempts to write in response to my mother's manuscript, I took a leap of faith onto stage. It was an auspicious leap. In the margins of earlier drafts I had sketched out a one-act play with my father and I climbing up an enormous tree to escape wild animals. Sparse and prickly, I wanted to relay it in a humorous repartee, with my 82-year-old Puerto Rican father clinging to the stiff and unwelcoming branches of some Pacific Northwestern pine. After several exchanges of dialogue, all set on the first branch, I gave up.

The attempt provided a foundation of inquiry. How could I invent a location of exchange with my subject matter? It seemed that this place would also encourage key perspectives to sound out and be heard. As I continued, I found a voice willing to respond to my mother's manuscript. I tackled, subdued, and eventually incorporated the voice into my work through the character, [N]arrator (pronounced N -narrator) . My mother and I could share the stage and tell our story. A visual, dimensional, choreographed story.

How might a staged narrator gain attention? In a ballet or a play, on a stage in a performance, in front of an audience of willing witnesses—the narrator is often a trusted truth and a generous guide. To characterize the narrator is to admit that the story is limited but that there is a kind of limitlessness of similar experiences in the lives of the audience.

In my play, the [N]arrator emits emotion through action and storytelling, while buffeting the audience from the despair forced on them via the story and characters. [N]arrator exists in a liminal state as well. They are not gendered, they are sometimes capable of objectivity, they are aware and communicate to the audience, but they are always on the verge of being lost in the action, consumed by regret, grief, and pain at their loss.

N gestures to the exodus of stage people but does not offer assistance. They sit in a pretty position on the floor for much longer than anyone is really comfortable. Makeup and mirror to their side. Their gaze is focused on a crumpled figure up against a sharp divide. (“The Performance”)

Poet’s Theater

Kevin Killian and David Brazil’s anthology, *The Kenning Anthology of Poet’s Theater 1945-1985*, was a turning point in my project. Poet’s Theater defies genre, it might be more appropriate to consider it a hybrid mode, one that is not immediately recognizable except for the disorienting effect (much like magical realism). Killian and Brazil claim that there is “the absolute instability of a clear definition” (ii). Exposure to the form liberated me from the dialectical structure I had previously attempted. That is to say, in earlier responses to excerpts from my mother’s original work, my writing was limited to my perspective. What I wanted was to create an intimate lens through which the events of my brother’s death could be accessed. Like capturing a continuum of perspectives throughout our three lives, and into a possible future. I started with a narrator and a stage, yet, the more I read examples from the anthology, the more I felt what was possible.

Most of the plays from Killian and Brazil's collection include and act out an element of resistance. Though portrayed in various ways, between characters, between audience and actors, within character—resistance becomes a kind of tension which compels the audience (the reader, too) to investigate the why behind the play. For example, why in “Two One-Act Plays” (1964), by Lorenzo Thomas, does the one paragraph of text include a 3rd person overview of what the audience and actor will do, before “The actor exits and five minutes later, ...one thousand men enter and physically assault the audience” (Thomas “Intolerance” 194). A veritable crashing through the fourth wall. Poet's Theater resists traditional form, resists societal norms, resists the folly of implying that all staged performances are the same. Perhaps many authors associated with the genre wrote with the intention to have their work performed, or, perhaps the form liberated them from a more typical narrative or poetry structure. Regardless, the wide variety of texts which are included in the anthology reveal that these writers were interested in challenging the status quo.

What I created felt like it was born out of necessity. After many attempts, it became necessary that I reckon with the complexity of being a narrator who wanted to engage like a witness. I needed a form that would allow for such opposition to occupy a singular space. Once I found a character to translate my memories for an audience/reader the story-telling became easier, fluid, purposeful. The stage and narrator, even as a concept, was liberating. Tension between characters and objects, as in my brother's body and the fence, were possible because the story was no longer confined to the page. In my mind, even my mother's text gains life by framing it as a staged performance. My goal was always to express my complex role in relation to my brother's death. My research into Poet's Theater exposed me to such a variety of broken rules that, if anything, it allowed me confidence to pursue what had been, up until a point, an experiment.

The question that Killian and Brazil pose in their informative introduction helps: “Is a poet’s theater play a work of subtraction?” In its glory, poet’s theater was an airing of ideas, abstractions, imaginings, lyrical rants and ridicules. Killian’s solo publication reinforced the idea that Poet’s Theater should call out and name its critics and abusers. While others claim that the purpose of the theater wasn’t to alienate those who did not fit into a mold of in-jokes and opinion. In fact, it was a place (often an actual place) to reconstruct, create and demonstrate language within an implied social sphere by setting the stage for impromptu possibilities. These scripts include prose and poetry, song, dance, elaborate stage instructions, omniscient commentators; all in all, elements that often seem impossible to actually perform in person. The tension is not only in the action, it is in the attempt to realize what these productions could look like, and what kind of resourceful imagination a reader/audience might have to access in order to accept the unusual form.

For example, earlier plays in the collection adhere to norms of structure in format, but later –a full forty years later– plays are more experimental in the way character lines and stage directions look on the page. That is, even if many of the writers included in the collection are poets writing for the stage, they maintain a freedom that is not always easily translatable in terms of action. “spell #7” (1979), a choreopoem by Ntozake Shange, (coined by Shange to describe a dramatic work that combines “poetry, dance, music, and song”) emphasizes the potential fluidity between stage direction and speaking lines:

[...the other members of the company enter the bar in their street clothes, & doing steps reminiscent of their solos, during the minstrel sequence. as each enters, the audience is made aware that these ordinary people are the minstrels. the company continues to dance individually as eli speaks]

ELI: MY kingdom
 there shall be no trespassers/ no marauders
 no tourists in my land
 you nurture these gardens or be shot on sight

carelessness & other priorities
are not permitted within these walls
i am mantling an array of strength & beauty
no one shall interfere with this
the construction of myself
my city my theater
my bar come to my poems

(Shange "spell #7" 350)

Shange's title, "spell #7" is named for the magic spell that can turn a black person white. The magician character Lou, explains that his father retired from being a magician when a young black girl "asked to be made white on the spot" (346) The play is staged with actors who, even as they abandon their minstrel blackface, are compelled to explore the consequences of disguise, forced and chosen. Identity is complex in this play and part of the obvious tension. Eli is a "bartender who is also a poet," a character whose truth can only exist in a poet's speech. By the end Lou, who possesses the power to address the audience, rouses the company to sing "colored & love it being colored" (Shange "spell #7" 382).

Ntozake Shange's poetic monologues engender the autonomy of her characters. These are long pieces, in some cases taking up an entire page. She employs the slash and refuses capitalization. The effect is bold, but also intimate. In my thesis, there are several occasions when I attempt this intimacy through the longer pieces spoken by [N]arrator. Similarly, I embolden my mother's character Eve who speaks the excerpts from her manuscript. Some of the longer monologues are not what one might typically associate with traditional theater. The departure of syntax and tone and subject haunt the present actions. Even if simply read without performance, the excerpts from *You'll Be Sorry*, are an interruption. A method of interruption that is meant to emphasize how constant is the effort to renegotiate traumatic events, memories tainted by grief and regret.

Regardless, the form is a bit of a modern enigma with various other definitions floating around the internet: A Poet's Theater should be a "theatrical event," should be scripted, preconceived, open-ended, and site specific (pomoculture.org). What interested me about the mode was that most of the plays were nuanced, audience-driven and polysemic—and most important, not elitist or too highbrow for those who were interested in the unique type of performance.

One of the more challenging works is by Fiona Templeton, titled "Against Agreement: Dual Duet #4" (1982). It begins with pages and pages of instructions on how to stage her play. Under the subtopic entitled, "Cooperative Exercises," Templeton explains how exchanging leads on stage will work off of one another to volley the role of instigator. Several described characters and actions resonated. In particular, Templeton describes a "chorus," who acting as one body is described under the subtopic "Characters and Structural Characteristics (And Ploys)." The Chorus is a common character whose evident reactions to staged events plays out in a public space. Templeton's chorus reacts and guides the audience in their reaction to the action.

4. Bartender Chorus

Within the single set of instructions for the Chorus, each bartender acts or reacts specifically within his or her given character, both in the scenes behind the bar where they behave as bartenders, and in the climactic scene of each act where they are on top of the bar .

(Templeton "Against Agreement" 451)

My first instincts in writing "The Performance," were to include a public response to the private act. Mainly because suicide committed in public becomes part of the communal space. Inked on a public wall in the public eye, a suicide forces on bystanders the role of participant—not something the general public desires, but something that compels them to witness for as long as they travel that shared pathway. A witness sees from one perspective, yet the public

witness—in the case of a staged play—can be portrayed as entering the suicide space from a simultaneous shared and separate container—the train.

Ballet

“Plot Point” performed by the Pacific Northwest Ballet, is a ballet influenced by noir-esque story and film popular in the 40s. Choreographed by Crystal Pite and set to Hitchcock’s musical score for *Psycho*, the performance is incredibly meta. Shadow characters costumed entirely in white (unformed, unfaced head pieces) act out and interact with human dancers. The program notes by the choreographer, Pite, reveals how she resisted including predictable elements of a complete story or play and instead built out characters and set from detective noir by first sketching tableau scenes.

The aesthetic is Freudian, with white shadows seemingly compelling their human counterparts to commit acts common to film noir: adultery, crime, revenge, and murder. Pite claims that one of her “challenges in working with narrative elements, but not delivering a story from beginning-middle-end, [was] finding a way to get the audience to invest in what they [were] seeing...” (11). What we saw, as an audience, incited an uncomfortable acquaintance with the horrible acts we knew we (the dancers) were capable of committing. It was a revealing experience, in as much as when we are asked to identify an inkblot we see our fears, our enemies, our true natures and tell the inquirer, I see a butterfly, I see poetry.

The effect of the performance echoed Poet’s Theater. Heavily scripted movements, with coordinated duets, chorus, and solo leads, were evident. But somehow, because of the unsettling sparseness of the set, costumes, and dancers, the audience could never trust that the white shadows weren’t intent on a full revolt. A revolution which would animate their numbers to break the fourth wall and seek out new and more dynamic souls. The audience, myself included, was indeed wary.

Sitting in the audience, watching the staged performance, I was acutely aware of the relationship between watchers and performers. I questioned whether my choice of creating [N]arrator would allow for the motility of the characters. That [N] might distract a reader from imagining the set and the performance of the stage. I realized that the stage is the biggest actor, especially when considering the power of dimension, of scale and color, of the imagined sound of bodies in the public space.

The stage is clean of props except for a set of tracks running the full length, appearing from the right wing and disappearing into the left wing.

Stacks of white paper, typed fonts filling every reasonable space, are piled precariously around her desk, on the verge of falling. Sheet by sheet, they leaf-fall descending to the stage.

N, a dramatic performance walk, they cross the stage back and forth stopping to consider the body by the fence.

(“The Performance”)

Audience

Who is the audience and why does it matter? This is a story about family, mental illness, suicide—dire subjects, remote to many, too personal for some. How to tell it in a way that allows for more perspectives but still creates space for the poetry of feelings, raw, remorseful, unrelenting?

At the same time, does a tableau imply an audience? Similar to the relationship I understood in Poet’s Theater, by arranging my memories in a manner that authenticates a witness, the tableau effect is relevant because time is a loop of hauntings. The *tableau vivant* of Pite’s ballet brought this forward. The “living picture” requires an audience to infer how the arrangement fits into the staging, or rather for my purposes, fits into the continuum. Let’s assume that the act of remembering is picturing living stills that might replay in a loop in the

mind like a ghost haunting a troubled space (a space where the living experienced a passion of emotions). A memory requires a rememberer. Without a place or person to receive the image, there is no haunting. Without a witness, a horrible event is silent.

The relationship of the audience to the staged actions in “The Performance,” and “The Rehearsal,” are not intended to be ambiguous. If anything, I imagined [N]arrator speaking to a fairly bland set of attendees, whose relation to the play and its contents are superficial, practically commercial. They are there to be entertained. Nevertheless, they become accomplice witnesses, like [N], like the chorus of commuters and barflys.

As big a role as the physical stage plays, the final piece, “Off Stage,” zooms out and takes the reader-audience away, above, and out of the theater. “The prominence of performance and installation art” in the 60s and 70s, according Killian and Brazil, began to explore how art and language could exist as companions in a staged space (Killian and Brazil xi). I thought, could the stage, its props and setting, the audience and theater, become an installation? Could the action be freed from confinement?

Captured for display, a tableau is one memory frame informed by past, present, and future. Sure, a reader/audience might be able to impose a kind of timeline to the events of my brother’s death, but my narrative moves forward from the past, continually from a point beyond, and then spirals out from the past. In my mind this leap on the continuum proposes a new beginning for a promising future. A future that might not be bound by time and space or the corporeal realm. With freedom from his corporeal body my brother deserved a spiritual stage.

Martians

Early in the project I asked my mother about some of her favorite books, records, movies when she was growing up. I was trying to understand her writing. I was intrigued by her obsession with *The Doors*—a name that always reminds me of Aldous Huxley and acid experimentation, which works out because I’m fairly certain that the acid my mother was taking

in the 60s was super potent. My mother had been a hippie in the 60s. Her parents were from the Great generation. They thrived on routine, consistency, pragmatism, conservative values. She ran away to New York City when she was right out of high school; she wanted a community who wanted her for who she was, not one that forced her to conform. It echoed my brother's resistance to the suburban values my mother had tried to escape from, but never quite succeeded.

After gathering a substantial list from her, I started to research her favorites, subsequently landing on something unexpected, *A Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert A. Heinlein. When I encountered the language used by the central character, Mike Smith, a literal Martian whose surprising presence on Earth creates political havoc, I thought there might be some similarity in the way "the Martian" and my brother processed their lived experience. Early in the novel, Mike, the Martian, is held captive by the government in a hospital facility. They run tests on him and try to teach him English. His caretakers have little sense of his intellectual aptitude. Inherent in their treatment of him is an impatience that he doesn't understand, isn't normal, isn't predictable by their standards. But, Heinlein offers us Mike's perspective:

He felt that dismay which so often overtook him in trying to communicate with these creatures. But he forced his body to remain calm and risked an answer. "Feel good."

"Good!" the creature echoed.

"Doctor Nelson will be along in a minute. Feel like breakfast?"

All symbols were in Smith's vocabulary but he had trouble believing that he had heard rightly. He knew he was food, but he did not "feel like" food. Nor had he any warning that he might be selected for such an honor."

(Heinlein 9)

Sure, it's funny that Mike thinks he's food because he doesn't understand the idiom; in reality, language can divide a person from their physical place and their sense of security. Alienation is an act. The speaker alienates Mike the Martian because he isn't sensitive enough to adjust his speech. Is it possible that my brother encountered such blatant disregard? He

likely was subjected to perpetual language that emphasized how he was different. In the last years of his life, he too, was in a government facility. Housed with individuals suffering from similar mental illnesses might have reinforced how incompatible he was to live in the world.

A Martian is one who is othered by society. Consistently marginalized, so much so, that it becomes an internalized facet of identity. I remember when my brother got a tattoo of a woodpecker on his neck. It was supposed to refer to a popular alcoholic cider that punks drank. However, as one might imagine, in a Chicago suburb neck ink didn't really help him interview for jobs or avoid negative attention from passers-by on the street. If he already felt like an outsider, he made decisions that exacerbated the way he was treated by society.

What was most familiar was a constant companion, a feeling of existing on the outside of conventional life. His sister and mother seemed to be able to straddle multiple social spheres, but as he got older, he became more and more limited. Perhaps it had always been a symptom of mental illness because even as a young child my brother was often unhappy, dejected, reticent. A non-belonger. An unwelcome alien. A stranger. How does one whose identity is restricted to the margins of society find a will to live?

Osamu Dazai's novel, *No Longer Human*, informed my understanding of my brother's struggle in a different way. The main character is less symbolic than Heinlein's "Martian." The novel is somewhat semi-autobiographical; so the language the despondent and tortured main character uses to describe himself is terrifying because it puts words to what I imagined my brother must have felt about his existence. Fiction or not, more than anything, it is the language of a lonely soul.

I have always shook with fright before human beings. Unable as I was to feel the least particle of confidence in my ability to speak and act like a human being, I kept my solitary agonies locked in my breast. I kept my melancholy and my agitation hidden, careful lest any trace should be left exposed. (Dazai 28)

The novel is translated from Japanese to English by Donald Keene, who comments in the introduction on how the main character's only strong conviction is that "he alone is not 'human'" (Dazai 9). Close to the end of the story, the main character takes his life after barely surviving addiction and alcoholism. He treats himself as if he should not be alive, and dies with no sense that anyone will miss him. The character's immense capacity for self-loathing is overwhelming. The language he uses is that of one who not only accepts his role as an alien, but cannot fathom any possible solution to remedy or address his angst. He is not only strange to his society, he is his own antagonist, a stranger to himself.

In "The Hunger Artist," a solitary perfectionist balances on a trapeze above the ground, twenty or more floors high. Every time I read this story, I experience a familiar dread while watching the eventual downfall of a character whose fatal flaws are misaligned with the values of those in his society. Misalignment, alienation. Visually, a large group of points form a circuit, yet, several nonconforming points exist outside of the shared space. Franz Kafka captured the isolation, the resolve of a singular stubborn Martian existence.

Kafka often seeps into my writing. In this piece, his influence is in the peculiar and distant character of my brother whose presence—prior to the stage action—is barely felt before he takes his life and then his death becomes a catalyst for the living.

In Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, the lone character depicted as a parasitic adult child, is pathetic because of the approval he seeks from a family who abandons him once he cannot be depended on to pay their rent. His usefulness expired, he becomes a nuisance:

It has to go," cried his sister. "That's the only answer, Father. You just have to get rid of the idea that it's Gregor. Believing it for so long, that is our real misfortune. But, how can it be Gregor? If it were Gregor, he would have realized long ago that it isn't possible for human beings to live with such a creature, and he would have gone away of his own free will. Then we wouldn't have a brother, but we'd be able to go on living and honor his memory.

(Kafka 52)

The existence of a child in the home who suffers from mental illness or addiction is similar to a parasite. What good is he to a family?

After reading “The Hunger Artist,” nuance was obliterated. I saw my living brother as a hungry person, struggling to sate his hunger with the meek emotional rations offered by his family and his community. On the other hand, Gregor in *The Metamorphosis*, transforms into a bed bug because his family limits his individual expression through their co-dependence. His pathetic refusal of the life that is required to satisfy his family’s needs results in a reverse metamorphosis—instead of a butterfly, his corporeal self dies (an insignificant bug death) and he becomes a meek exhalation sacrificed to the modern, superficial wants of a family who gain a more spacious apartment and better dowry for their daughter. Both the artist and the insect hunger for more than their immediate society can offer, or even care to offer. Both expire after a long trial of humiliation and despair. Gregor’s initial transformation frees him from human form only to trap him in his room as an outcast. What if Gregor had transformed into something awesome? What if both characters had one more chapter to stake a claim on a more promising afterlife? I couldn’t help but wonder, could I rewrite the ending?

Creation Story

In mythology and creation stories, life and promise are born out of the viscous remains of the dead. There is always the potential for regeneration. By alluding to trickster mythology that death can be a disguise, or simply a reimagining, or better yet an escape from the mundane, I tried to create a space for an afterlife that would unseal the finality of my brother’s death. If my piece is an elegy to his life, then the end is hope for his rebirth.

He jumped the tracks and permanently crossed out of our life. My mother’s name is Eve, the mother of all humans. [N]arrator is a mother too, on stage they are a mother of the story. “His Crossing,” contains “She,” an original mother. One who reclaims lost souls and transforms them. The geography is familiar, with a bridge this time instead of tracks, an

abandoned stranger's skin replaced by "fur and feathers"—multiple creation archetypes folded into an imagined rebirth of a person who was born different.

In this way the ending is no longer a tragedy. The narrative is a memory mosaic, like a Dali dreamscape, where persons and events, images and psyche are on display. They combine to haunt the viewer, to linger in the lived space. I always thought if I practiced remembering I could reconstruct bit by bit. But...

I remember so little, I was witness to practically nothing, I had to reach into the pitch, extract my heart, and listen to what it wanted to say.

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