

# IN SEARCH OF LOST WOMEN

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## ABSTRACT

In Search of Lost Women

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*In Search of Lost Women* is a palimpsest of theory, memory, and literary companionship. It is concerned with exile, sexuality, loss, and possibility. In this work I was interested in using a constellation of these varied lenses to create a performative exploration of trauma theory and nonfiction. My work seeks to explore the language needed for the double telling of trauma that oscillates between the crisis and the survival of it. The nonfiction was informed by my experience of being a body in time. The world—my world—that I used as fodder for coming to terms with the language of trauma is one that has been accustomed to equal parts violence and wonder. *In Search of Lost Women* is an effort to create encyclopedic mystery that documents the intersection of those two forces. Specifically, the theoretical scaffolding of this work was informed by Luce Irigaray's theory of mimicry which I came to understand by way of Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter*; trauma theory via Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*; and performative discourse inspired by Helene Cixous' body of work, particularly through her collection *Stigmata*. Additionally, *In Search of Lost Women* participates in a practice of dialogue with three writers who have helped me to make sense of the world. My chapters are in dialogue with Jean Genet, Oscar Wilde, and James Baldwin. *In Search of Lost Women* is equal parts prayer and howl—fundamentally, its deepest wish is to serve as a vehicle—a kind of lexicon—that allows light in through fracture.

For Gina, who will never know that she is  
beautiful, but deserves better.

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Acknowledgements:

Nicole: My mother, my friend, my champion. I would not have made it without your love. And for John and Lia—the Holy Family—you taught me how to be a part of the world again. You let me watch bears playing in your yard. You held my hand when I was sick. This work is in gratitude and honor of your unconditional care and magic.

Jeff: When I met you, you told me that if I stuck around long enough I'd learn how to introduce myself better. Perhaps the title earned in part from this work—in part from your belief in me, or the way you whisked me away to the dentist, or the times I called you in despair or in confusion of some human simplicity I'd never encountered—will help. Now, *Don't Order the Fish*.

Bettina:

After crossing the Xth bridge and  
rounding the corner of Ajax, I  
watched secret blossoms blooming in  
a meat locker well suited for morning sleep.

A Murakami night turned Time Life dawn  
christened by a blood red sun  
We saw it once, too, on the moon—  
beckoned gulls unto my death.  
Resurrected, we heard the Emperor's  
Call. A song of ecstasy, or relief.

## An Introduction

You have to systematically create confusion, it sets creativity free.  
Everything that is contradictory creates life.

—Salvador Dali

Some time ago a friend became rather concerned about my relationship to prayer. I reminded her that where I grew up religion and prayer had the same place in the house as did Nintendo and communal meals: they simply never came up. This friend began to teach me different prayers that had meant something to her over time. She asked me to begin each day by thanking an imagined tribal goddess living in some Amazonian jungle. To relax by way of sending light through my womb and into the earth and letting the light wrap around the earth's core and receiving it back into my body. She believed tremendously in fairies. She once told me she spent the whole night agonizing over a traumatic memory and envisioned it as a dragon at the other side of her door. When she finally got up the nerve to confront the dragon, she opened the door to find a "field mouse."

Many months passed by and even under the tutelage of her consistent efforts, still I did not feel an energetic commitment to the life of prayer, nor could I comprehend its intended value in ordering my life. In exasperation my friend called me one morning while I was on my commute to work—which entailed a one mile long walk to the train station.

"Your higher power," she said, "is what you can imagine right now that would walk this road with you and keep you safe no matter what."

She asked me to begin to meditate as to what it would mean if some golden guardian took my hand and protected me on this walk and in any past or future walk down hill, dale, ocean, or valley. To my surprise, the effect of her suggestion was immediate.

“I understand,” I said with some degree of joy, “God is Ziggy Stardust.”

To my surprise, she was instantly relieved, “Yes,” she said, “exactly.”

Ziggy has walked with me since, and I with him. Sat across from me on the train. Turned my head away from temptation and then pushed me toward it. My higher power retains an unconditional space for my contradictions. I begin each day by praying my favorite line of “Moonage Daydream” to him: “Don’t fake it, baby. Lay the real thing on me.”

My journey toward the “real thing” encompasses some rather strange realities that have shared a persistent relationship between beauty and brutality. It has taken me some time to identify what it might mean to reconcile the two. One of the initial barriers to such a degree of acceptance is that such a balance is not fodder for Hollywood material, nor is it something that is easily wrapped up in a bow and packaged as a gift. Life after trauma is a strange animal with its own pulsations, exquisite sensibilities, and exotic needs. My mistake was that for a very long time I believed that if it did not already exist, it could not possibly be, “the real thing.” Not to mention the rather unlikely suggestions of “real” that have sprung up along the way like misinformed signposts to Oz.

My experience of continuing on in a world after trauma is that the barometers of “reality” change in a big way. I believe this is the fault of a dynamic traumatic tension:

trauma allows us insight into a whole spectrum of possibility that ranges from the very worst to the very best. In fact, any broad definition of it entails recognizing that trauma falls beyond the realm of common experience. As trauma scholar Shoshana Felman phrases it, “The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of ‘normal’ reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during, and no after” (69).

Access into that traumatic beyond need not be condemnatory nor revelatory, though it is transforming. Once you’ve had access into this beyond the terms of the game are forever changed. So, of course, if you plan on continuing to play, you need to learn the rules. In fact, in order to come closer and closer to your “real,” you need to make those rules in a language that you feel you have unconditional access to.

To represent post-traumatic fragmentation, a writer must find a language that can survive cataclysm; as Celan says, “The breakage of the verse enacts the breakage of the world” (qtd in Felman 25). I believe that the secret to surviving trauma is to create a lexicon that regulates an internal cosmos—a concrete vocabulary that has the potential to represent that beyond. I believe that the secret to surviving trauma is creating a relationship to light. One that is contained internally and can contain even the fractured body. One that sees the “real thing” and raises it benevolent and unconditional—even glittering alien—protection.

My experience of trauma has taught me not to expect miracles, but to rely on them. *In Search of Lost Women* is a palimpsest of theory, memory, and literary companionship. It is concerned with exile, sexuality, loss, and possibility. In this work I was interested in using a sort of constellation of these varied lenses to create a



performative exploration of trauma theory and nonfiction. The theoretical scaffolding of this work was informed by Luce Irigaray's theory of mimicry which I came to understand by way of Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter*; trauma theory via Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*; and performative discourse inspired by Helene Cixous' body of work, particularly her collection *Stigmata*. This work is equal parts prayer and howl—fundamentally, my deepest wish for this writing is that it illuminates the possibility that light can come in through fracture. As Anne Carson writes in her *Autobiography of Red*:

“How does distance look?” is a simple direct question. It extends from a spaceless within to the edge  
of what can be loved. It depends on light. (43)

Cathy Caruth poses, “The danger of speech, of integration into the narration of memory, may lie not in what it cannot understand, but in that it understands too much” (*Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 154). I knew that to engage in performative language I would need adequate resources to bring into that traumatic beyond if I were to be expected to come back from it. Part of the journey to the “real” involves being able to trust it; I fundamentally longed to create a definition of safety in the wake of profound trauma—one that did not exclude any dimension of the traumatic experience. I wanted to use language to weigh the balance between integration and fragmentation; I wanted to learn if the traumatic experience can repair what it demolishes. If the underlying truth of trauma or of the narrative of trauma is a consistent fragmentation of the self, then that trauma's representation should signify the same shattering, by which it will be resignified as whole, fluid, capable of transmission. As Barthes writes in respect to the deliberately fragmented structure of his autobiography, “...if you put the fragments one after the next,

is no organization possible? Yes: the fragment is like the musical idea of a song cycle...each piece is self-sufficient, and yet it is never anything but the interstice of its neighbors....” (94). I have ensured that the fragmented accounts of the self in *In Search of Lost Women* have the very best neighbors.

Pamuk writes, “When no one ever again travels by night train with a novel for a companion, readers will have difficulty understanding Anna’s situation on the train; and when tens of thousands of such details disappear and fade, readers will have difficulty understanding *Anna Karenina* the novel” (46). A changing topography of reference compromises a reader’s ability to fully engage with Anna. When there are no reference points, such as in a narrative of trauma, there is an order, a system, a logic, a comfort, to being able to locate fragments of it within other voices.

As Cixous writes, “Stigma stings, pierces, makes holes, separates with pinched marks and in the same movement distinguishes—re-marks—inscribes, writes. Stigma wounds *and* spurs, stimulates” (xiii). I do not believe that *post-trauma* is a reality that is an option for the trauma survivor; we never shake the thing enough to create a new world without it. I was interested in using this work to come to an understanding of a world where trajectories of trauma and of safety continue on, sometimes as parallel lines into the cosmos, sometimes as lines that intersect dramatically. The commitment that I feel to nonfiction is to represent things as closely as I can to what I believe and can understand of “what happened”—all the while knowing what the brain gets up to when we experience trauma, the survivalist disassociation that comes with continuing on, and the elusive restraints of memory. The world then, my world, that I used as fodder for coming to terms with the language of trauma, is one that has been accustomed to equal parts

violence and wonder. *In Search of Lost Women* is an effort to create encyclopedic mystery that documents the intersection of those two forces.

In the end what I began to understand was that the experience of brutality can intensify the impact of beauty—eventually. And my definition of safety became compounded. I say at the end of this work that my ultimate experience of safety has been a repeated “headstand at the feet of brutality.” Somehow the offering of the body, for me, prohibits it from being torn apart. What I am saying is that it has been true for me that if I only treat violence as a strange gift, hold it to my chest and stroke its horns, then I cannot fundamentally be victimized by it. But this concern of “victimization” is a real concern, particularly for a female voice. It is a concern that I found irreconcilable; what I wanted was the privilege to document what it had meant to have met abuse at the hands of a man in the language of a woman. And this I could not find without the inherent danger of being castigated into the language of the victim or into the language of “self-help.” In his work *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra writes about establishing the distinction between victim and perpetrator in the narration of traumatic memory. If a woman willingly summons the memory of an attacker and sets it forth on paper, she has, in one sense, performed a re-traumatizing act. She’s written the attacker’s shoes. His mustache. Her hands. The sound of his breath. Her erratic heartbeat. LaCapra writes, “Unchecked identification [between victim and perpetrator] implies a confusion of self and other which may bring an incorporation of the experience and voice of the victim and its reenactment or acting out” (28). His work, his caution in the conflation of narrative memory and merging with the memory of an attacker, pushed me to think that if one were to write about a victim’s experience, one need not to do so in the language of a

victim. Indeed, I began to wonder what it meant that I did want to write about trauma, but that I did not wish to write for redemption or with apology. I did not want to demonize any demons nor sanctify any monsters. I wanted access into a language that would allow me to participate in a kind of “real” that had room for a woman to reserve her own judgments and to participate in representation without archetype.

In her work *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler describes the linguistic construction of sex as a “forcible reiteration of...norms,” (1) a reiteration that bodies do not always follow. Therefore, if a body rejects the linguistic conventions of its sex, it produces a voice through friction between what it seeks (representation) and what it defies (archetypical representation). Butler continues, “It is the instabilities...opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law” (1-2). This process of repetition calls to mind the heart of Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: that life after trauma is one of painful repetition. In his performative autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Barthes asks:

...the first impulse, the first shock, then, is to demystify (*mythologies*); then when the demystification is immobilized in repetition, it must be displaced: semiological *science* (then postulated) tries to stir, to vivify, to aim the mythological gesture, the pose, by endowing it with a method; this science is encumbered in turn with a whole repertoire of images:...one must...introduce into this rational image-repertoire the texture of desire, the claims of the body...(71)

When a trauma survivor seeks to replicate the terms of their trauma, the mind is hopeful that this time, just this one time, it will be able to forewarn the body of danger. The result is often painful retraumatization. The result is often a long-term relationship with danger. In this dynamic mixture between sex and language, power and trauma, and the link between repetition and creation, I thought that there must need to be some degree of—even unwitting—courage inherent to this process. Butler concludes, “As a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalized effect, and yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities....This instability is...the possibility to put the consolidation of the norms of “sex” into a potentially productive crisis” (10).

*In Search of Lost Women* is a performative exploration of the potentially productive crisis between realizing the representation of the traumatic feminine in language and the correlative crisis of repetition without re-victimization. I found an answer and access into the kind of language that I craved by way of Irigaray’s theory of mimicry which I first learned also through Butler’s *Bodies that Matter*.

Irigaray’s theory of mimicry comes from a discussion of Plato in her work *The Speculum of the Other Woman*. This theory in relation to Butler’s work suggested that if I wanted to write about the traumatic, I’d need to explore repetition with consciousness. I’d need to cultivate a relationship to influence with male writers who I felt could give me access to the language of a privileged vulnerability and whom I could also rest comfortably in admiring. I drew on the work of Oscar Wilde, Jean Genet, and James Baldwin. Each a permission giving voice which challenged me to question the parameters of my “reality,” allowed me to be emboldened by the chaos of queer creation, and

shepherded me into a relationship to vulnerability that had heretofore felt prohibitive to my female voice. Somehow, speaking directly to each voice broadened my understanding of the possibilities of language, and challenged me to find a language adequate to representing my experience of the “traumatic beyond.” Each man taught me something important about what it means to negotiate the feminine in literature. Each chapter of this work is a sort of running dialogue with one of these voices, and that is a dialogue that I wanted to make as transparent as possible. This desire introduces me to my relationship to citation in this work.

Inspired by Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*, I chose to incorporate exact lines of text from Wilde, Genet, and Baldwin into the netting of my own story; their words appear in italics. Sometimes, these citations finish my sentences, sometimes they overturn them, and sometimes still they create “contact.” Caruth writes, “There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one’s story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life” (13). The voices of Wilde, Genet, and Baldwin helped to surface a buried truth—in part because they assisted me in verbalizing it. At first, I thought that this sort of call and response fell into the realm of magic realism, in the way that citation would appear at a moment in my story much in the same way that—when things got tough—a man with wings would appear in Marquez. In the tradition of magic realism, when the “real” becomes so terrible that it cannot be born, the story takes refuge in magic. I liked this idea of protective language, though as I continued to craft these dialogues I realized that my relationship to citation was taking a different turn.

Rather than pulling me out of the hard moment, these dialogues were helping me to complete it. I believe that my relationship to citation is a renegotiation of the tension between need and permission. In a post 9/11 interview, Patti Smith once said that she wished Andy Warhol were still here, because he was who she needed to make sense of what was happening in the world around her. I felt a profound sense of need while writing the traumatic body. A need which asks us to call on those who make sense of the world for us. I have had the privilege to feel a closeness to Wilde, Genet, and Baldwin that has allowed them to be lighthouses over time, beacons of possibility, advents of authenticity without shame, and light without despair. But in crafting these dialogues, I received a sort of permission from these voices to apply the cause of representation and order my own experience of trauma.

Maggie Nelson uses this discursive practice in her work *The Argonauts*, which has recently been awarded the National Book Critics Circle award for criticism. Nelson shows readers how her relationship to philosophy has helped her to make sense of relationships, motherhood, and a persistent radicality, even and especially while embracing the transcendent.

These are the first several crots of *The Argonauts*:

October, 2007. The Santa Ana winds are shredding the bark off the eucalyptus trees in long white stripes. A friend and I risk the widowmakers by having lunch outside, during which she suggests I tattoo the words HARD TO GET across my knuckles, as a reminder of this pose's possible fruits. Instead the words *I love you* come tumbling out of my mouth in an incantation the first time you fuck me in the ass, my face

smashed against the cement floor of your dank and charming bachelor pad. You had Molloy by your bedside and a pile of cocks in a shadowy unused shower stall. Does it get any better? *What's your pleasure?* you asked, then stuck around for an answer.

Before we met, I had spent a lifetime devoted to Wittgenstein's idea that the inexpressible is contained—inexpressibly!—in the expressed. This idea gets less air time than his more reverential *Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent*, but it is, I think, the deeper idea. Its paradox is, quite literally, why I write, or how I feel able to keep writing.

For it doesn't feed or exalt any angst one may feel about the incapacity to express, in words, that which eludes them. It doesn't punish what can be said for what, by definition, it cannot be. Nor does it ham it up by miming a constricted throat: *Lo, what I would say, were words good enough.*

Words are good enough (1).

Maggie Nelson is a poet; in this work of nonfiction, these crots work much like stanzas as the beginning of one overturns the previous, creates a new tension, gently drops you into a new conclusion as it progresses. And yet each crot stands alone, as well. In this introduction into her work about the radical, about motherhood, about creating new terms for what love can look or feel like, Nelson draws immediately on Wittgenstein to help her order the parameters of her new world. As she leads her reader to the conclusion that words must be enough, she is equally convincing herself of the same. The *Argonauts* is a



testimony to how words have been enough for her. Nelson's discursive practice allows her to make her way through what has influenced her. Her work in conversation with Wittgenstein and others orders her world by texts she has found refuge in—and the result of this synthesis is a new language. It is a language that contains *spolia*—pieces of another world used to build the foundation of the new.

I love the tension of italics in Nelson's work: rather than hide her relationship to influence, or leave it to the readers to discern who she must have been reading at this time of writing, Nelson makes that part of the process transparent. Her work is a dialogue that gives readers access into the voices who have ordered Nelson's world by being able to see them—performatively—in the text. This is all to say that dialogues are a part of any writer's process. We cannot escape who has taught us how to feel, to write, to order the world in language. *The Argonauts* is a call to let these pieces rest on the surface together. When I engaged in this process with Wilde, Genet, and Baldwin, I found that their voices called me further and further out to unimagined strata of my own story. It's like because they made the suggestion to go forward, I felt no shame in heeding it. I also felt a sort of companionship with their voices—that by documenting their words alongside mine, I could show what I really mean when I talk about looking for the “real thing.” The performative dialoging amplifies one fundamental belief: I have needed these voices all along and I counted on them here, in this work, still.

Felman poses that bearing witness to trauma in narrative is possible even when there are still no clear answers or solutions. She writes that psychoanalysis challenged traditional ideas of testimony by suggesting that “one does not have to *possess* or *own* the truth, in order to effectively *bear witness* to it....the speaking subject constantly bears

witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially, *not available*, to its own speaker (15). *In Search of Lost Women* is a performance of trauma and it calls on different tools to bear witness to resolution. In the tradition of magic realism, I decided to consign the conflict resolution of these three essays to literary criticism. These sections of criticism appear within the body of the essay much in the tradition of Mrs. Ramsay. The essays are then cliffs which ask readers to walk to the edge of a precipice, and then jetty them forth into a new system of language ordering. Each platform of language leads to the same conclusions. For example, to document forgiveness, to document my closeness to it and need for it, at the exact moment I needed it, I turned to how it worked in Wilde's life. The same is true with the thirst for the "second self" in Genet and what it means to harbor emptiness in Baldwin's work. This idea is a further excavation into the process of healing: I use literary criticism at moments in the story where I need different tools to come closer to resolution. This visceral process of reasoning and performance became essential to my understanding of performative trauma theory: the work became a place where I felt a sense of belonging, in part because I crafted it with every tool I could reach.

In this introduction, I will first discuss the theoretical scaffolding which has underpinned this work and then move into a discussion of what these dialogues with Wilde, Baldwin, and Genet have meant to me and how these writers have helped me to negotiate the language of the traumatic.

## The Theory:

### 1. Trauma

The performative quality of *In Search of Lost Women* is paradigmatic to the relationship between trauma and narrative. As the research suggests, the process of recognizing Otherness or the unspeakable nature of trauma begins by naming it—even when that naming is not plausible. As Felman writes, “To testify from inside otherness is thus to bear witness from inside the living pathos of a tongue which nonetheless is bound to be heard as mere noise” (231). My work owes its courage to partake in performative research to the work of Hélène Cixous, particularly to her work *Stigmata*. It is Cixous’ willingness to allow her writing to go through the process of investigation—without purporting to have attained any concrete conclusions—that I look up to most. For example in an almost etymological discussion of loss, Cixous writes:

I want to tame the impassable....

But I want to be there when I lose.

I don’t want to lose the loss.

But see how I discover that this too must be lost.

The worst part of grief is this grief that doesn’t let itself be suffered...(95)

If we can only ever be on the frontier of saying the unnamable, any authoritative declaration on trauma, on loss, on grief, cannot be anything more than ephemeral.

Cixous allows the process of delving into trauma to reclaim its narrative to be entirely transparent in her work. The transparency of reasoning without attachment to an answer is what allows light to enter the work.

LaCapra writes:

In acting out, the past is performatively regenerated as if it were fully present....Mourning involves recognizing its difference from the

present—simultaneously remembering and taking leave of or actively forgetting it, thereby allowing for critical judgment and a reinvestment in life....By contrast, to the extent someone is possessed by the past and acting out a repetition compulsion, he or she may be incapable of ethically responsible behavior.” (70)

Narrative may very well be the delineating mark between metacognition and unwitting recreation. What trauma theory teaches the trauma survivor is that because trauma is something that has no corroboration with the way we process ‘natural’ reality, we do not actually experience trauma in the moment, and this otherness of experience dooms us to continue repeating it. With each repetition the survivor emulates the circumstances of the initial trauma in the hopes of finding a new resolution for it (something that can be processed); what more than often happens, however, is simply a retraumatization. We are continually working with something we never understood and cannot possibly rearticulate. In her work *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Ruth Leys writes the traumatic memory may not be directly correlated to narrative, but rather to “‘nondeclarative’ memory, involving bodily memories of skills, habits, reflex actions...” (7). Because trauma is said to fall outside of common experience, because it skirts language, contests memory, and disorients while it creates disaffect, it is that much more important to do as Cixous suggested in her famous “Laugh of the Medusa” and *write the body*. *In Search of Lost Women* purports to engage in this confluence of narrative and physicality by exploring scenes of intimate violence, withering addiction, and emotional carnage; this is to say, that to write the body is to engage in contradictions.

Felman poses that in Camus' *The Fall*, the narrator's encounter of a suicide (he walks past a woman along the Seine, hears her jump in, and continues walking) is "a radical disorientation and a gradual disintegration of everything that, in his life before it, had seemed safe, familiar, given" (165). This scene is a model of disorientation: if what we walk past challenges our understanding of familiar places, what could happen if we'd known the woman who jumped is nearly unimaginable. The Seine, in that moment, has become a safe place that is not safe. How we continue on after that moment, and indeed the language we use to understand our experience of that moment, is a theme *In Search of Lost Women* explores. As Felman poses in her discussion of Camus's *Plague*: "It is precisely because history as holocaust proceeds from a failure to imagine, that it takes an imaginative medium like the plague to gain an insight into its historical reality...its unimaginability" (105). Because trauma is unimaginable, we equally need a language that exceeds the boundaries of the imagination if we are ever to find confidence in narrating the impossible. This is a further place where I privileged my relationship to citation; LaCapra writes, "Trauma brings about a dissociation of affect and representation: one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel" (42). What LaCapra does not say, however, is that one begins to feel again. And that is perhaps a more disorienting state than the preceding numbness. To be able to contain returning feelings, a survivor needs to be able to locate them in other places that she trusts. The first time I had to leave a place I truly loved I wept tears that I never left for leaving home; I needed to mine many resources to understand why I felt what I felt. When departure, as Freud illustrates in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is no longer an anticipation of a joyful return, it is simply sweet

sadness. And it can be hard to understand how to carry that feeling; *In Search of Lost Women's* discursive practice suggests a process of identifying feelings around trauma and locating them in safe works—again, and again, and again—until the words are that much closer to realizing the story's arc.

Though I understand that it is a rather quixotic idea to tell my own story by dialogues, it is by no means an original literary tactic. The idea that a writer may use the extraordinary as a means of understanding the terrible is the very same idea that lies at the heart of magic realism. Fitzgerald says that the test of a first rate intelligence is, “the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function” (“The Crack-Up”). That we can straddle two worlds at the same time and retain the ability to function can perhaps only be understood through works which tackle the fantastic. I'd like to make the distinction here between magic realism and fantasy. Magic realism offers a language to negotiate two worlds that exist at the same time—one that resembles the natural course of things and one that intrudes into that normalcy without so much as an introduction, let alone an apology. In fantasy, we escape normal parameters. In works of magic realism we must make sense of living in two worlds at once—a practice which bears resemblance to the act of looking for safety in spaces that have been shattered of their meaning, boundary, and connection. There is a beautiful moment in Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore* when it begins to rain fish. The initial reaction of the passersby is to simply move beyond the accumulating puddles of fish on the ground. This moment feels truest to my understanding of trauma. How wonderful would it be to cause a fuss or to document some kind of outrage. But more often than not,

even after the intrusion of some bizarre or terrible force, we continue walking. Steadfastly, even, just beyond the puddle.

In this work, I have tried to treat trauma and queerness as Murakami treats a sky that rains fish. I have tried to ask what it means to continue walking without trumpets or grief. I have tried to allow readers to peek inside a void but forbid them to remain immobilized there. I have not tried to write without hope.

I equally did not feel that it was necessary to provide some documentation of coming to terms with sexuality. I wrote queerness into this work as I have experienced it. And somehow not queering queer was indeed queering. This is why I was so utterly dependent on crafting a lexicon of my understanding of the world: I am operating with language that allows for fantasy, for radical loss, and radical acceptance. As Felman writes, a testimony is the “shock of the unintelligible in the face of the attempt at its interpretation” (xx). It was important for me to bring together, on one transparent page, the voices that allowed me to participate in the creation of that world, in the confrontation of that shock.

The ideas and intersections collected in this dissertation serve as a renegotiation of the impossible by following Felman’s three-pronged model for the witness to recover her voice: 1) decanonize the silence 2) desacralize the witness and 3) enact the liberation of the testimony from the bondage of the secret (xix). I found that to decanonize silence it was necessary to create an equilibrium that is true of the world that I have experienced. The voice in these chapters radically shifts, moves from a hollow to a kind of vulnerability, but there are no moments in this work that rank above another. I have not tried to privilege experience; I’ve sought merely to show the possibility of representing it.

The implication of trauma theory is that there is a story to tell that cannot be told; therefore, the research we have is an asymptote that with each dividend comes closer and closer to center, but never exactly gets to the target. Freud first posed the unrelenting repetitious cycle of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Feminist critics—like Laura Brown (1995) who argues that “...a feminist analysis calls us to look...to the private, secret experiences that women encounter...at the hands of those we love and depend upon”(102)—have since challenged this interpretation to question the additional Otherness of the female experience in relation to trauma. In the last thirty years, literary critics like Cathy Caruth (1996) have made trauma theory—the impossibility of trauma’s representation—a lens in which to understand works written after World War II. What the conclusions of the interdisciplinary studies share in common is the preposterous nature of explicating the inexplicable. The task rings of the last line of Beckett’s *Unnameable* (1953): “You must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.”

In post-Holocaust studies, testimony, though an imperfect medium, has become a necessity for establishing meaning in a broken world. Both Cathy Caruth and Shoshanna Felman are pioneers in the field of literary trauma theory and proponents of the essential nature of testimony. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* Caruth states: “If a life threat to the body and the survival of this threat are experienced as the direct infliction and the healing of a wound, trauma is suffered in the psyche precisely, it would seem, because it is not directly available to experience. The problem of survival, in trauma, thus emerges specifically as the question: what does it mean for consciousness to survive” (61).

It is an altered consciousness that survives trauma: one that cannot fundamentally



represent the trauma that caused it but perhaps sees into a different plane of resolution.

Caruth writes:

If traumatic experience, as Freud indicates suggestively, is an experience that is not fully assimilated as it occurs, then these texts, each is in its turn, ask what it means to transmit and to theorize around a crisis that is marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness. Such a question, I will argue, whether it occurs within a strictly literary text or in a more deliberately theoretical one, can never be asked in a straightforward way, but must, indeed, also be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding. (*Unclaimed Experience*, 5)

The crisis of witnessing is that we each witness the same event in a way that speaks to a private, incommunicable nature. Therefore, share what we might, we each understand a profoundly different answer to the question: what happened? I have used my relationship to citation to create witnesses to the unwitnessable.

Caruth poses that in the stories of narrative trauma she analyzes there is “a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (*Unclaimed Experience*, 7). We cannot hope to survive trauma because we have no parameters for hope—much in the same way that we had no parameters of understanding the trauma’s possibility. Thus, the task of bearing witness to trauma is to first admit that the task itself is impossible—or, rather, impossible to represent in conventional narrative. Felman writes that testimony:

cannot efface the Holocaust. It cannot deny it. It cannot bring back the dead, undo the horror or reestablish the safety, the authenticity and the harmony of what was home. But neither does it succumb to death, nostalgia, memorializing, ongoing repetitious embattlements with the past, or flight to superficiality or to the seductive temptation of the illusion of substitutions. It is a dialogical process of exploration and reconciliation of two worlds—the one that was brutally destroyed and the one that is—that are different and will always remain so. The testimony is inherently a process of facing loss—of going through the pain of the act of witnessing, and of the ending of the act of witnessing—which entails yet another repetition of the experience of separation and loss. It reenacts the passage through difference in such a way, however, that it allows perhaps a certain repossession of it. (91)

Critics like Robert McNally have argued against Caruth's theory that we cannot possibly experience trauma in the moment. Holocaust testimonies have been questioned for their authenticity—were there two smokestacks or one? But we cannot work with specifics of detail when we are trying to communicate the incommunicable nature of the heart—we are only in some bizarre cross-section of things, as Murakami writes in a dialogue between a truckdriver and a cat (2005):

“But how can you speak human language?”

“We’re on the border of this world, speaking a common language. That’s all.” (*Kafka on the Shore*, 446)

## 2. Cixous

Caruth poses, "...through the act of survival, the repeated failure to have seen in time—in itself a pure repetition compulsion, a repeated nightmare—can be transformed into the imperative of a speaking that awakens others" (*Unclaimed Experience* 108). I think the common language between literary magic realism and trauma theory is the assays of possibility that each written testimony offers to the next survivor. We cannot deal in the time, space, body, or place of the trauma, because we can only begin to recognize those specifics long after it has ended. The hitch of trauma is that, in the search for meaning, it creates a repetitious cycle for the survivor that never ends. A documentation of trauma is something finite used to describe something infinite. We can only hope that what can speak of one experience can speak to something unnamed of another. Through the merging of fantastic literature, theory, research, and what I can remember of experience I still largely do not understand, I hope that this dissertation will be a call and response that participates in the possibility of narrating the unnameable. As Barthes writes, "I am only the imaginary contemporary of my own present: contemporary of its languages, its utopias, its systems (i.e., of its fictions), in short, of its mythology or of its philosophy but not of its history, of which I inhabit only the shimmering reflection: the *phantasmagoria*" (59).

*In Search of Lost Women* is in debt and gratitude to Hélène Cixous, particularly her work *Stigmata*. In the 1970s Cixous encouraged women to "write the body" ("Laugh of the Medusa"). In the mid-1990s Cixous' published her collection *Stigmata*, a performative exploration of the process of inscribing trauma through the body of a woman. Cixous writes: "I want stigmata. I do not want the stigmata to disappear. I am

attached to my engravings, to the stings in my flesh and my mental parchment. I do not fear that trauma and stigma will form an alliance: the literature in me wants to maintain and reanimate traces. Traumatism as an opening to the future of the wound is the promise of a text” (xiv). This is the language in which I want my dissertation to participate. Cixous’ collection offers a performative merging of experience, literary analysis, philosophy, and theory that suggests that those are the terms in which Cixous understands and processes. With her guidance, I have tried to document those same relationships. As Cixous concludes, the writing is “not a desire for mastery or for triumph. It is the fabrication of the raft on nothingness” (197).

### 3. Irigaray

In *The Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray writes:

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the “perceptible” of “matter”—to “ideas,” in particular to ideas about herself that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make “visible,” by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. (qtd. in Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 47).

The presentation of this theory forced me to ask where I could comfortably locate the feminine within language—and the answer that I came up with was in Wilde, Genet, and Baldwin: three “homosexual” writers who negotiated the feminine in celebration,

negation, and isolation. I had not been able to find a comfortable “feminine” place into which I could write my voice until I began to discourse with these men. My relationship to Wilde, Genet, and Baldwin is a reflection of where I found safety. My relationship to Wilde, Genet, and Baldwin is a reflection of possibility. When I first read Irigaray’s theory I thought it was a call to illuminate places where the feminine had been displaced from language. But by performing this theory, I found the opposite of displacement taking place. I found that it is both possible for the feminine to be located in male works and that doing so would allow for essential contradictions and create friction with what I had believed to be gendered limitations of language. The discursive practice of this work created a boundless sense of the feminine because of its possibility to be located in Wilde, in Genet, in Baldwin, and this sense of boundlessness was precisely what I needed to engage in narrating that very same traumatic beyond.

Irigaray’s theory suggests that we mime the masculine voice to create a paradoxical absence of the feminine. But, in the end, I found that the work that I created was a paradox in that it wasn’t so paradoxical after all.

All of the theory surrounding trauma suggests that at the moment when it happens, we have no ordering principle. We have no reference points. We have no precedent of experience in which to negotiate its impact. In the wake of trauma we are jettied forth into a sort of absence of reality, a void or vacuity which bears no image or language. I found that to try to document this experience, I had to enlist these dialogues as a point of contact from a stretch of abyss. And instead of propitiating a dichotomy, I found that this act of mimicry, of dialogue, only allowed me further access into an authentic voice. For me, mimicry has meant candid transparency. For me, rather than

recovering a place of exploitation, I feel as though I was able to initiate a dialogue in the effort of claiming a voice that should very well have been unclaimable. I found that Wilde, Genet, and Baldwin were gift-giving voices. I tried to honor their range of feeling by allowing it space into my own narrative. It was a point of light on the horizon that I could try to work up to and continually remain inspired by.

Here is something of what I learned from each man:

The Dialogues:

1. Wilde

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud defines the traumatic repetition compulsion as a force that drives us toward our own ruin—again and again and again. This is to say that after we have experienced trauma, quite literally, our brain chemistry becomes altered. We have a chemically different understanding of what stasis looks or feels like. And to regain that stasis, we won't let anything get in the way—not even and especially our own safety. A trauma survivor comes to seek out what sought her first. And she comes to recreate it.

This is a terrifying theory.

But it is not without its own truth. I wanted to challenge myself to explore this theory performatively and try to access a language which could document it. But I ran into several challenges early on: I could not think or had no relationship to a female voice which not only got to ruin, but came back to it, and could document as much without becoming a *telenovela*. I am not a reader of contemporary fiction. I do not propose to

have understood the gambit of female writing when I looked to Oscar Wilde to help me understand my own relationship to ruin.

I began the journey of writing *In Search of Lost Women* by reading Wilde's *De Profundis* (which appears in the second chapter of this work). What I was looking for was an understanding of a dynamic mixture of ruin and admiration, desire without stigma, bravery without shame, and elegance without sympathy. These of course I found in *De Profundis*, but what I had not anticipated was the realization that this letter from prison—which indicted Bosie, condemned his flaws, articulately elocuted the idea of mistake—was simply a request for a reunion. I nearly could not believe how coded this request was. I nearly could not believe how simple it was.

Of course while he was in jail for two years for “crimes of gross indecency” Wilde surely thought fondly of some of the indecency which accounted for his sentence? And perhaps he had access to indecency without fear because the worst of the thing had already happened. The courage it must have taken to write such a condemning invitation was precisely the feeling I sought, and while the story of the thing was dandified, the voice of *De Profundis* was pure, honest, calm, and prescient. And so I began to write to that voice.

*In Search of Lost Women* mirrors a child's game: as a child would go into a swimming pool and some kind adult would toss a penny into the deep, lines of *De Profundis* were pennies thrown into the deep which I plunged for. And each line allowed me to plunge a little deeper into my own internal abyss. Much like Ziggy, these lines, which I've incorporated through the work in italics, were lights into a deep fog. And I longed to make that fog transparent, so transparent as to allow the actual lines to stay

entirely in tact in the work. Consequently, *In Search of Lost Women* reads as a call and response. The reader can see what it was in Wilde that took me to where I arrived in myself. This pattern replicated itself in both the chapter with Genet and the chapter with Baldwin, but more of them later.

The important thing for me to tell is that each of these dialogues allowed me access into what I would have considered a “forbidden room.” Woolf once advocated that every woman should have an income and a room of her own. If we push that into language, I wonder what each woman would need to feel a sense of possession in her space. For me, Wilde helped me to carve out a sense of emotional distance without shame.

I remember reading an indictment about Joan Didion’s relationship to distance. I remember that the man who interviewed her for this indictment was rather strict with her that she had not given enough of herself. I’ve since wanted to ask him just how much of her he wanted? And when as a reader did he get to demand more than she was willing to give? I wondered about the attachments to images of nurturing that are archetypically glued to the female voice: are we expected to write stories that give everything and end neatly? And where does that expectation come from? Oscar Wilde taught me that I can negotiate what I would like to give without apology. This is the first instance when I felt how powerful Irigaray’s theory of mimicry could be. The process of mimicry merely points in the direction of what Irigaray considered to be the impossibility of writing the female voice, but when it does so, it produces a tension between what cannot be expressed and what has been expressed through the body of another.



In my chapter of dialogue with Oscar Wilde, I use his words, taken from his letter to Bosie from prison, to address someone I once cared about very deeply. And in doing so I found that I created a paradox, just as Irigaray suggested. The story that needed telling was a traumatic one. Several problems presented themselves to me at once: 1) that I could not think of addressing this love without animosity or resentment, 2) that surely doing so would cast my words into a sort of Hallmark coven of second-rate Harlequin romance, and 3) that I was to be a woman addressing a woman who had broken my heart and I wanted to do so without writing myself into some lesbian stereotype. I wondered what my resistance was to reconciling the story—my story—with art; I did not think it plausible. Much in the way I struggled with finding a “real” that had yet to be represented, I certainly hadn’t found a story that I felt adequate to representing mine. Until I began to write to Oscar Wilde.

I found that rather than mimic Wilde, as if in some sort of other child’s game, I was connecting to him deeply, and true to the title, he was allowing me room in depths I had written myself out of: either out of shame or fear or maybe even the gender of my voice. But what I found instead was a buoying companionship. For example:

And my last ounce of patience vanished as I realized then that because you are a woman who talks to tulips I will never not be in love with you. And all of these moons later, here we are at this public event and you tell me you would never have dreamed of seeing me again. *You think one can have one’s emotions for nothing. One cannot. Even the finest and the most self-sacrificing emotions have to be paid for. Strangely enough, that’s what makes them fine.*

It'd have been much different if I were the one to say that the finest emotions must be paid for. I am a voice to become acquainted with. I have a history that may very well account for legend one day, but as of now, it's simply as Didion says, a story I tell myself in order to survive. When we hear those words from Wilde, we hear them from the perspective of longevity. Having Wilde's companionship allowed me to keep up with the weight of my own myths. I love the cool tempered hand that wrote prophetically of Christ, remorsefully over a marriage he could not be faithful towards, unabashedly towards articulating Bosie's faults, and shamelessly as he detailed their anticipated reunion.

This cool hand solved a riddle for me: how to write about homosexuality without being sentenced to a gaol of assumption or culturally collected ideas. In keeping with Murakami's fish, I found that in *De Profundis*, queer was not at all *queered*.

In nowhere in Wilde's work—and this was a work he wrote while incarcerated in part for his homosexual identity—did Wilde *queer* his identity. In fact, *De Profundis* is a profound celebration of a career, an insatiable drive, and a love that wouldn't quit. Oscar Wilde doesn't, "come out of the closet." He never explains what it meant to him to find love in two genders. He performs what he is without being sentenced by it, and this kind of bravery without explanation I found to be essential in confronting the writing of my traumatic narrative. Wilde's story asked me if it weren't then possible to represent all of the shrapnel of trauma—all of the fragmentation—as a whole person. Before I vested my story in Wilde's words, I had not thought I was entitled to a narrative which would allow for all pieces of my story without shame. I have come to accept this possibility of hosting contradictions as a sort of definition of unity.

With Wilde's help, the second chapter of *In Search of Lost Women* is a direct letter to a woman who broke my heart. I address her as such, hope that the reader feels that this story is entirely transcendent of the "you" it is written to, but also does not forget the inherent exclusivity of that address, either.

This perspective, this "you," is a radical shift from the first chapter in which the "you" that I address is a younger version of myself. This performative trauma bears the consequences of irreconcilable disassociation: to continue on, it could not have been I who experienced those experiences, so I've crafted a persona who I trust will survive it. To accomplish this end, I looked to the voice of Jean Genet to guide me into those depths and protect me from being consumed by them. Together, Genet and I explore Freud's death drive in relation to the experiences of the young woman we address.

## 2. Genet

Sartre writes that Genet's *The Thief's Journal* was a work of plaintive exposition—but though Genet seems to conceal nothing, he cannot actually be located within the work. I was dramatically drawn to this possible relationship between exposition and vulnerability. *The Thief's Journal* positions the brutal on the surface but deprives the reader of the impact of brutality.

Here is an example of how this positioning of the brutal worked for me specifically:

Your nearly bare body is pushed up against the dingy walls of an out-of-service-phone booth while two truck drivers beep an inviolable witnessing and you ask a man whose name you don't know to hand you your coat, please. *The veil of modesty torn, the shameful parts show, I know—with*

*my cheeks aflame—the need to hide myself or die, but I believe that by facing and enduring this painful anxiety I shall, as a result of my shamelessness, come to know a strange beauty.*

This is a scene which details a sexual assault in six sentences or less. The reader either feels deprived of realized details or possibly wonders why I have invited her into such a moment without offering any resolution. I can't tell the answer, exactly. I can say that what happened for me in this moment is that when my words switch to Genet's and journey to his "strange beauty"—it's a synthesized "strange beauty" indeed, like a torch of bravery that I found within Genet and burn in my own work. It's an honored conversation with a sort of soothsayer confidant, and in sharing it, I share the possibilities of creating dialogues with soothsayers.

The young woman in this first chapter suffers deeply. And I, as her narrator, claim that her genesis was in a kind man's blood. What sort of erratic juxtaposition needs to take place to privilege that vantage point? If I return to that ivy, does that little girl ever really make it out? Or can we look back together now at that scene as an emotion recollected in tranquility? I leave it to the reader to negotiate the brutal. In this first chapter, I use Genet's unabashed relationship to sharing what he wants bottomless of our expectation of redemption to create a shadowed montage, a sort of fortress of language. I allow the reader inside, but I certainly do not invite her to sit down. As a sort of compromise, the first section of this chapter, and there are four, is written as a running scene of intimate violence. It is the mark of "after," the traumatized body trying to make contact with the world around her. The traumatized body continually seeking to be

destabilized—but safely. It is meant to be a prism in which the reader can view the subsequent chapters. It is meant to be a sort of accounting for them.

The citation in this chapter is from two of Genet's works, both reflected in the literary critical section at the end of the chapter. Genet's first work, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, uses a female body to gain access into the grace of femininity and the grace of despair; the body acts as a refuge of feeling. Genet's Divine is a man who appears as a woman and has her heart broken many times over by very bad men. Genet elevates her by giving her a Dumasian consumptive death in a Montmartre turret—Divine *is* Mimi—but his use of her body is exploitative. But somehow, and again this belief is a reflection of the painter not the sitter, I could accept a greater range of emotion, a greater range of vulnerability, through this Divine body.

I can't name, exactly, the nature of my own resistance when it comes to negotiating the female voice in literature, in nonfiction, but I can say that I think Genet has a privilege of emotion—with the way in which he handles homosexuality, desperation, and adoration—that is not so accessible to a female voice. These qualities are revered when found in a male narrative, and expected, or even commodified as common when found in a female narrative. Genet's hard won spectrum of pain transcends gender and speaks to deeper struggle. However, it is troubling not to be able to identify a female counterpart who achieves that same range. Creating a dialogue with Genet asked me to be fearless about writing through desire, but forced me to temper surrounding emotion with a cool hand. The elegance that I believe I was in contact with in Wilde's work changed, in this dialogue with Genet, into insouciance.

The second half of this long first chapter—as indicated within the work—is in conversation with Genet’s *The Thief’s Journal*, one of the most painful acts of nonfiction I have ever come in contact with. It became wrenching—the commemoration of this thief’s life—after having read that once Genet was pardoned, once Sartre, Cocteau, and Foucault rallied on his behalf and made sure he would never be in jail again, Genet could not write for years. He had made a kind of pact of acceptance with himself that part of his identity was this idea of “thief,” and when he was deprived of it, he felt he was deprived of an irremediable part of himself. *The Thief’s Journal* is equal parts shock and eulogy. I could feel his words in the back of my throat as I read him—I know what it means to be confused about continuing on without a “second self” that has caused nothing but harm. And how wrong the “right” thing can feel on first encounter.

In the third dialogue with Baldwin, I give up the ghost of distance in the first two chapters and switch to an “I” perspective. I ask myself and my reader what it means to tell something that I cannot wholly know myself.

### 3. Baldwin

To achieve the representation of vulnerability of the third chapter of this work I did two things: the first is that I was emboldened by the candid unreliability of Dostoyevsky’s narrator in the *The Brothers Karamazov*. This mixture of wavering and lack of punctuality and prescient tone came together for me in a way that felt like the “real” thing, in the way that life after trauma can never rely on the conventions of a linear story to do its telling.

But engaging in a dialogue with James Baldwin shook my core. Chapter three writes to his work *Giovanni's Room*, and discusses it in a literary critical context.

*Giovanni's Room* is brief. It is a well of feeling, a masquerade of exile, raw without compromising profundity, remorseless even while it eulogizes. It is without shame even while it speaks to harboring it.

To my great surprise, allowing myself to participate in the performance of this dialogue brought me to the first pure instance of hopeful writing that appears in this work—and it comes in the very last sentences. I won't spoil them here, but I will say that *In Search of Lost Women* moves from a fortress-like chapter that addresses a younger “you” to a letter that addresses a “you” that was once loved very dearly, to a claiming of an “I”—a sense of vulnerable presence that has not erased any of the preceding fragmentation, but somehow, allowed it all to exist.

### Liberal Studies

My experience in a liberal studies doctoral program has taught me to never privilege one discipline over another, even and especially the disciplines I am most comfortable working in. The Arts and Letters program has fundamentally taught me to be a creative problem solver—I found that by taking courses in many disciplines I was able to see multiple prisms of understanding and found conflict after conflict explored in patterns of language that all work toward the same heart, solution, or redemption. For example: A course in Irish history taught me something about survival with wit. A course in Victorian Literature taught me something about survival with elegant haunting. And a course in Women in Film taught me something about survival with outrage. *In Search of*

*Lost Women* is a radical culmination of the gifts of a liberal studies doctoral program because I was able to bring resources and genres together that allowed me to work toward the fragmented, contradictory—but possible—representation that I was after. For instance, this introduction cites trauma scholars, Freud, French Feminists, David Bowie, Salvador Dali, Anne Carson, Oscar Wilde, and Roland Barthes—to name a few. When I believed that there was language that would help me to access what it means to tell a traumatic story, I brought it into this work. I consistently went beyond the scope of my discipline because I was gifted with the privilege of having been exposed to many vantage points through my coursework. The writing process felt like having access to constellations that provided guidance, theory, and wit. With every course I took in this program, I learned more and more about what it means to have a limitless voice. By that I mean that by going through the research and writing process again and again in multiple disciplines, the world becomes larger, but the process allows for a claiming of that world, an integration, a belonging, a possession of something otherwise elusive. I learned that I had been holding a contrary belief; the Arts and Letters program taught me that creative writing requires the mind—a cool-tempered hand and resourceful restraint; critical writing requires the heart to animate it, to show its deep connections. *In Search of Lost Women* combines these two beliefs by working in criticism and in nonfiction. It is because I was taught so carefully to respect the discipline of literature that I was able to produce this radical work—I learned the rules very carefully before I worked with them so fluidly here. My respect for the discipline of literature has helped to order my world—Wilde, Genet, and Baldwin have long been guiding voices for me, internally. But it was my time in this doctoral program that allowed me to begin to externalize the process and



to represent it. Though he does not appear directly in this work, it was a course on Cormac McCarthy—particularly his work *Blood Meridian*— that shattered my previous ideas on what it was possible to represent on the page. This shattering—and so many fractures appear in *In Search of Lost Women*—challenged me to consider a profound possibility—that even the terrible is hopeful, when we can find language that represents it.

Only Utter Beauty: A Pretext  
(The Story of an Addiction in Four Parts)

“If we may assume as an experience admitting of no exception that everything living dies from causes within itself, and returns to the inorganic, we can only say ‘*The goal of all life is death*’, and, casting back, ‘*The inanimate was there before the animate.*’”

Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

(1)

*What's going to follow is false (OLF, 225)...<sup>1</sup>*

“Look at your bathtub,” she said, “it’s lovely.”

I climbed out of bed and walked across my studio and turned on the bathroom light, looked past the 1960s pink and black tiles, the arachnoid pile of bobby pins on the sink, and the Bette Davis shrine on the far wall and looked down in contemplation at a rather marvelous white tub I’d never taken notice of.

“I just never thought of using it before” I told her.

“I have,” she said, “more than once.”

She told me to get myself a candle and some bubbles and “sink in” as it were.

I had a reserve of prayer candles I had picked up at a bodega just before a storm, so I put them around my tub and poured milky coconut soap into scalding water. “This isn’t some kind of baptismal scene” I told her as horrors of a Flannery O’Connor story about a young boy’s death by drowning via rogue baptismal attempt surfaced in the tubs depths. In the water, I could feel a dull ache begin to give way. I’d never taken notice of my bathtub before because I shower for exactly 9 minutes in the morning after I do enough yoga to occupy the time it takes for Janacek’s *Sinfonietta* to play through. I give my cat 12 treats that are supposed to help with her sensitive digestive track and while I’m in that cabinet I take out one cinnamon stick to mix in with the coffee grinds of my

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<sup>1</sup> *The italics of the following chapter are taken from Genet’s Our Lady of the Flowers and The Thief’s Journal. There are various other voices cited within the body of the essay—their names (Tom Waits, Sartre, etc.) appear next to their citations.*

French press. Before I leave the house I pray to Ziggy Stardust and leave with exactly seven minutes to spare to catch my bus to work. I vomited the second I signed up for my first electric bill and pay it the day that it comes because it is a deep-rooted fear that having a relationship with PSE&G must mean I have an irremediable connection to the world. When I get home at the end of the day—and I am alone—I eat eggs on a prayer cushion and listen to *Blonde on Blonde* on vinyl while I burn two sticks of Nag Champa and lay down with my cat in the dark a considerable time before I am “tired.” I am the type of woman you’d be privileged to find yourself in a hurricane with. I

I got to this home of the bathtub in the middle of the night about a year ago. I had a rental car for two days and drove around looking for “For Rent” signs and when I called about this one the realtor asked me to meet her right away. Once inside she told me that she knew that I was in trouble and handed me the key. Free week’s stay. No references. No credit check. All I needed to sign the deal was a promise that I’d never sleep another night in the place I was clearly running from. In the middle of that same night two friends broke into said place with me and we salvaged a couple hundred books, a yoga mat, and a lamp in the shape of an elephant. We drove them over to my new place as dawn filled the rear window of the rented car, utterly delighted. I have known what it means to rally.

Because of my relationship to trauma, I have become a bastion of ritual and punctuality—two tools which allow me to negotiate the paralysis of “continuing on” that can feel like a thorny rosebush bristling in my intestines. Because of my relationship to trauma, I find that I never truly see the “bathtubs,” or the moments that are built for them. Survival skills help you do just that—make it out of the storm. They don’t teach you how to put your feet up.

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I say “I never knew you had to ask before you hit, but still, you hurt well.”

“It can be hard. To see you rise up to it. Do you think it started for you in the phonebooth?”

And, “that’s funny,” I say, “it could be so. But I think it started...”

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I think it started in the Musee de Beaux Arts while I was looking at a Daumier painting of a woman, breasts bared, being chased by centaurs. Her fleshy thighs clearly prohibitive of her escape. When I drew closer to the painting I noticed that there were deep cracks in the horizon, in the hooves, in her flesh. I looked up the painting later and learned that years after he completed it, Daumier filled this painting with vibrant and electric colors to, what? Alter a sense of somber entrapment with discordant light? Enrapture femininity by commemorating it in crimson dress? Hail the centaurs by illuminating their conquest? The layers of paint explained the deep cracks in the facade. It had been years since I’d been to Montreal.

Through the cracks of my own facade I remembered back to the first time I saw that city— I was an itinerant teenager out of my league and jumped in a car with the kind of women I wanted to surpass after I used dry. One night in a wind storm we settled into an Irish pub and I can remember a fiddle player bought me enough shots of whiskey so that I could no longer feel cold nor wind and walked outside in no shoes and a thin dress and cried at a bodega for having forgotten what the kind of cigarette I liked was called in French. The next thing I knew I was singing on top of a bar and kissing a stranger and those women said it was time to take the party back to our hotel room. I told them I’d

walk back and some man kissed me like he knew me, so I imagined he did, and he said he'd make sure I got back ok.

Tom Waits: *Goddamn there's always such*

*A big temptation*

*To be good, To be good*

At the time, I would go anywhere in the hopes of finding my way out of my skin. I believed that if I kept repeating this process, one day I would simply disappear. I'd never counted on surviving it.

I remember this man pushing my dress up in a phone booth as two truck drivers beeped an inviolable witnessing as I began to take notice of the cold as I asked for another drink and for this man to hand me my coat, please. *The veil of modesty torn, the shameful parts show, I know—with my cheeks aflame—the need to hide myself or die, but I believe that by facing and enduring this painful anxiety I shall, as a result of my shamelessness, come to know a strange beauty (TJ, 163).*

In the morning, bruises around my neck, this man slipped a wedding ring back onto his finger but not before he asked if he could take me to the docks to watch the boats come in. Though I declined, I did so warmly, it's customary, where I come from, that you kiss your monsters goodbye. *I want to rehabilitate this period by writing of it with the names of things most noble. My victory is verbal and I owe it to the richness of the terms, but may the poverty that counsels such choices be blessed (TJ, 59).*

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“Did you want to see the boats?”

“I thought it might be the end of me, for real. Destroy the evidence by way of precious morning suggestion.”

“So you didn’t really want to die, then?”

“Excuse me?”

“If you did, you would’ve gone with him.”

“How long do people usually stay in bathtubs?”

“There’s more to tell, here. Did you tell your friends, did you tell those women what happened?”

“No,” I say, “if I had named it then I would have had to admit its reality.”

I can feel how the submersion in water will only hold so much of my body and to compensate its surfaces what I have wrongly contained. I like the tension between pressure and expulsion, though what is emerging seems to have emerged against my will. I keep going, into the depths. I tell her that when I was a little girl if I wanted to process a feeling I would wait till I could get to water. Summer was best because I could do it in the Town Pool. But I’d make do with the bathtub. I would take the feeling underwater and hold my breath and wait until that stabbing came into my temples and I thought my throat might constrict. And I’d surface long enough to do it all again and again until the feeling was obliterated.

“I’d go to any lengths for pleasure” she said, “and you’ll do the same for pain.”

“There doesn’t seem to be much of a difference,” I begin to say and she grabs my hand and pulls it backward and stops moment before breaking my finger.

“You see the difference now” she asks.

“Yes,” I lie. One silent tear. A wish that she hadn’t stopped.



And, “that’s funny,” I say, “it could be so. But I think it started when...”

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I think it started when I was five-years-old and a neighborhood girl with a reputation for “trouble” knocked on my door and my mother—who incidentally shared in that same reputation in our small town—asked what was wrong and seemed impressed by me when she heard all this Trouble wanted was to go outside and play—with me. I walked out the door that day a five-year-old girl and came back with a ten-year-old best friend.

I remember the first time she kissed me we were sitting on the hill I’d been rolling down not weeks before. She got on her knees and opened my legs and crushed my face into hers. I lost my breath. And when she let me go I fell back and waited for the clouds to come back into focus. “This is love” I remember thinking, “because I love her, this is love.”

Soon I was smoking on my elementary school playground while I was still a student there. Love had quickly become something that broke rules. Love quickly became something that burned my throat. Love quickly became something that was threatened by being “found out.”

At night we’d gauge whose house it was safer to sleep in. We’d made a hole in the neighbor’s fence that separated her house from my apartment complex. And when he patched it up we made one more hole. And when he patched that, we made one more. Love became something that I could not sleep without.

There were three boys who lived in the house across the street from her. We loved playing with them. Weren't above skinning our knees to win a game. Or wiping the other's tears—privately—when we got pushed down.

I remember that the youngest boy began taking karate lessons. I walked him, one day, into his bedroom and shut the door. I was in the second grade. I asked him to get on the bed and then I sat down with my back toward him and asked him to kick me, as he'd learned to do in karate. I kept telling him what a good job he was doing. Asked for it again and again and again.

I remember Trouble putting her hand over my bruises. She didn't ask. I didn't tell.

---

“So she taught you everything you know? She asks.

And I laugh and say, “you’ve never had a complaint.”

“What happened to her?”

And I say, “This is like Madonna’s *Truth or Dare*, the Trauma Edition.”

And she says, “Don’t stop.”

And I say “that’s funny, it could be so. But I think it started when...”

---

I think it started that night she brought over pot and I asked what the crystals were and she told me not to worry and later in a PCP trip I thought that the crystals shooting out of my eyes illuminated her fingers which were really talons which could rip me apart though they reached to touch my heart gently beating.

I can't remember why I wouldn't go to that concert with her. All I remember is that afterwards Trouble called and she was largely unintelligible. I told her that I would

come and get her and we would worry about her car tomorrow. But by the time I said that, she was already driving. I didn't know whether to stay on the phone with her so that I could hear her voice, so that I could know that she was ok, or if I was just going to be another distraction. Soon, she burst through my door and collapsed onto my bed, sobbing into her hands.

Trouble told me that after the concert when she walked to her car a man came up to her in the garage and said, "coh-cah-een-ne? Coh-cah-een-ne?" And she said, "yeah, ok" and followed him to a bar nearby where a police officer actually said "Miss, you don't belong here" and walked her back to her car. If I pieced together the rest of the story I'd say that she then got in her car and stopped it again as soon as she passed another bar.

"Why did I follow him? Why did I follow him? What would you have done?"

My first thought was that she did not follow him for sake of the drug for coh-cah-een-ne was no scarce good in our circle, so she must have followed him to outwardly realize an internal compulsion. To feel her feet on a precipice of danger. To be in touch with infinite despair. She must have followed him to cement the story to herself that she no longer had a self worth saving.

My second thought was a wish.

But I just ran my fingers through her hair and waited for it to pass. We'd been here before.

"But aren't I so pretty?" She asked.

"Oh, but you're beautiful" I whispered, "you don't have to follow men in parking garages."

“This one time this guy gave me a bag of coke in his car. And he unzipped his pants, and for a second, just a second, I leaned forward. I thought I had to.”

I put her hands on my face and we cried together. Not a tool between us but a lifetime of experience trying to fix the other. Trying to mind the other. Trying to care for the other. Trying to hold the other. Trying to sleep without the other. Trying to feel without the other. Trying to think the world was worthwhile without the other. Trying to love without knowing quite how to get there.

“But aren’t I so pretty? Aren’t I pretty? I’m so pretty...right?”

---

“How much did you love her then?”

“More than I could bear.”

“So you left her?”

“While she was in a straight jacket.”

“What did you do without her?”

“It was not my first experience of loss.”

“What did you lose first?”

And “that’s funny,” I say, “it could be so, but I think it started when.”

---

I think it started when one night I was going to run an errand and my mother asked me if she could take me on this errand and I said ok without asking any further questions and it was a mistake I should have had enough practice not to have made again but I got into the car with her and her dog and I believed that we were driving to the

office supply store when I noticed that she was nodding her head in tandem with a football game and it raised my suspicions because she held a distinct aversion to sport.

Every so often she would cry a victorious “hah!” And I let her go unchecked for some time until I realized that we were making circles on a highway and I asked her what she was listening to, just like that I said, “you are really enjoying this game” and she said, “they’re listening, the FBI. They’re coming right now to pick up your father. They’re telling me about it—it’s the game! It’s a code!” and she turned the game up a little bit louder and pointed to the flashing station’s numbers on the small screen.

We carried on just like that the circles on the highways marked by her nodding and “hah”’s and the dog panting and me sitting in the backseat no closer to the office supply store and gauging whether or not I should do something to commandeer the vehicle or if it would dissipate and she could safely pull over and maybe still we’d get to the office supply store when all of a sudden she accelerated.

“It’s them!” She said and began driving very close to the car in front of us. There was equal probability that my father was going to be arrested by the FBI or that my mother was having a psychotic break, so it was difficult to know what course of action to take next.

My mother followed this car for nearly half an hour. She flashed her headlights at them and beeped and waved periodically, as if to an old friend. “I know they are going to help me” she told me. She had spent a large portion of my young adulthood telling me how she would prize her mom if she still had one. She generally used this as a point of comparison to illuminate my deficiencies. As in a “you did not fold your laundry, I would never treat my mommy like that if she weren’t in the grave no one ever loved me like that

and no one ever will and if I just had her I wouldn't do to her what you do to me." In more recent evaluations of my mental health, I've been told that the world can feel terrifying at times because I spent so long being "detached" from my emotions. I'm told that this is a common enough strategy for negotiating the survival of the traumatic. When she would tell me these things about her mother it would sometimes occur to me that she had never accepted that she had become what she had lost—a mother. If that were true, then she would have had to see some of herself—an abandoned daughter—when she looked at me. Because I believe that there was a moment when I was an infant that she held me up to the light and wanted good things to happen to me, I believe it must have been impossible to confront her deficiencies as a caregiver and so she illuminated mine. You didn't have to be worthy of much to be worthy of some child you deemed a monster. But because I was so detached and because she was rather adamant about the way she believed the world worked, it never struck me that she might be mentally ill. It struck me that something was, well, "different."

Eventually, the car pulled into a fueling station and she pulled up alongside of them and asked if it had happened already? And they asked her why she had been following them and she turned to me and said "they're good, they won't talk to just anyone" and she told them that she'd heard them speaking to her in the game and it was ok, she understood the code and they asked her to please stop following them and pulled away rapidly as she smiled knowingly. "I should have known we couldn't have spoken in public. They played it so cool."

When I was a little girl I was always in school when I had a fever. My mother could not keep me home on the days she was not emotionally prepared to have a child in

the house with her. My attendance in school was a binding mental health contract. Consequently, I was on terrible terms with the school janitor. I vomited in every crevice of my classrooms. I had so much shame around this action because of the times I was punished for vomiting while ill at home (she could not clean the bathroom on the day that she was not emotionally prepared to clean the bathroom) that I tried to avoid the bathroom at all costs until it would of course be too late. Once, my first grade teacher walked in to our class bathroom and I was on my knees trying to clean vomit off of the floor with a square of toilet paper and I cried when she saw me because I thought she'd be angry and I asked her to come back later. She hugged me. Me, covered in vomit down my clothes and in my hair and snot and tears and shame and worry and she held me close and told me I didn't have to do that and called someone to take me to the nurse.

However, when my mom was not emotionally prepared to leave me in school for the day, she would come to the school office—often wearing a tutu and driving my father's pick-up truck—and we'd pick up and go to the beach for a few days and collect seashells.

I believed wholly in her ability to contain and unleash magic.

Right around the time that she was in direct communication with the football game on the radio, she would sit on her bed which was surrounded with lanterns and Victorian hats, and she would drum messages into her thigh with one hand and steer a small compass over a spirit board with the other. And she'd tell me tales of ghosts. Or of my grandfather who was unkind to her—he, she said, had been banished to another realm where he couldn't make any further communications. He had had enough to say once.

And sometimes she would tell me that her mom wanted to tell me that she thought my mom wouldn't act the way I do, if only she were still a part of this world.

"It's a good thing she's dead," my mother said one night, "I would never want her to meet *you*."

I read once that a psychotic cannot fundamentally separate her child from herself. Mother and child are bound together as one entity in the fabric of a mind that cannot hold congruencies nearly so well as it can retain inconsistencies. Maybe that's just a comfort for children of psychotics though—to believe that the treatment you receive is actually the treatment that the parent would wield against themselves. I don't know the precise moment where our schism happened. I do know that every step I took away from her she would tell me she was wrong. And when I curled up at her feet she either wished me death or took an action toward realizing that wish.

At the fueling station, she decided to take action and pulled up very closely behind a truck's bumper and followed him all the way to a scrapyard. The office supply store had long closed for the night. A misty rain settled on the windowshield and glistened under the yellow lights in the lot and when she got out of the car I grabbed the dog and followed suit. And she walked up to the man and took his hand and said, "I know that you are going to help me."

He looked at me and lit a cigarette and began to wag his finger when I said, "That's right, mom. He's going to help but he told me before over the radio that to help you, I would have to get you home safe, first."



She screamed. She did not believe that this was a script where I could assume any leading role. The truckdriver, clearly celestial, said “that’s right, momma. You got to get on home if we going to get you out of this mess.”

And she batted her eyelashes and told him when this was all over she would find a way to thank him properly—he had her number.

I let her drive home because I trusted infinitely in her trust of the celestial truckdriver. In the backseat I held on to our dog’s giant paw and he squeezed my hand in this special way he had. He had two different colored eyes and the calm of a man who’d been practicing Zen for lifetimes. I had rescued him out of a swamp when he was a little creature. There must have been something in the swamp though, because that little creature turned into two-hundred pounds of crazy fur. He had only ever known love, even in that house, and consequently that was all he put forth back into the world. I wished then that I could use him to speak for me to tell her how profoundly grateful I was for her safety.

When we got back to the house my father opened the door before we could walk inside and said, “where you been?”

“Office supply store” she said and put her hand on his shoulder. I asked him if anyone had visited the house or if he had received any strange phone calls? And he told me to shut the fuck up and get out of his way. “Ah,” I thought, “psychotic break.”

—

“So Trouble was your mother?”

“She was better equipped.”

“Where did you put yourself while it was happening?”

“Luckily, I kept more than one self on retainer.”

She had nicknames for these permutations of my soul that would unconscionably surface from time to time. There was, for example, a wild one she wouldn’t allow to make any decisions. And then a little girl holding her breath under water until it throbbed.

“What would you tell her?”

“Who?”

“You.”

“Which one?”

“Talk to her, they need you” she said and handed me a towel.

(2)

There would have been no light had you not brought your own as you sailed through a purple marsh of sky across the Nebraska border. *Don’t complain about improbability (OLF, 225)*. In the unprecedented abyss of that horizon you are certain you see impending fragments of pirate galleons; it is often at night when you lose the ability to discern imaginative planes from the tangible. *Few are the moments when I escape from horror, few the moments when I do not have a vision, or some horrifying perception of human beings and events. Even, and especially, of those commonly judged to be the most beautiful (OLF, 200)*. But as you approach you realize the grey dilapidation of aging barns—dignity in ruins against an immeasurable darkness. When you get back to the

motor lodge there is a blackout and you and the other guests file outside and you pick up a stray cat that has wrapped itself around your ankles and you hold it against your chest. There are no cars on the road and no signs of light. Then, in the distance you see lightning and you and the others gather closer and watch the surrealistic flash.

Sartre: *the pure, perceptible appearance of secret unities.*

In the flashes of light you see that a funnel cloud is beginning to form. And then it is masked by the darkness of the prairie. With each flash of lightning you watch the funnel cloud grow stronger. You hear someone yell, “that’s going to be a tornado!” but you are motionless aside from the tears streaming down your face. You should seek refuge. You should do as the faded emergency signs say to do and take blankets into the bathtub and cradle your head for shelter. But you keep watching. And just as it seems fully formed, the next flash of lightning shows that the funnel cloud is beginning to dissipate. You put the cat back down and walk to your room.

Tom Waits: *I can't help thinking*

*As I close the door*

*I have done all of this*

*Many times before.*

*What is involved for me who is making up this story?* (OLF, 80). Freud suggests that I can be a barrier against external stimuli for you, but I don't feel as if I can shield you from it any longer. I'll try to tell you now what you learned from the storm:

It was a subterranean terror that surfaced for you when you tried to read the riddles of lightning. It made you five-years-old again, leaping out of your dad's pick-up truck which you'd been held in against your will, and finding your mother on the balcony, a storm blowing her long blonde hair against her billowing black velvet opera cape. She extended a hand covered in stones and roses and lace and promises, a hand that offered safety but in the desperate radiance of her failing mind it was a hand that propitiated a cyclical rush of wonder and brutality. *For the poet and the reader, her smile will be enigmatic....If it were only up to me, I would make her the kind of fatal hero I like. Fatal, that is, determining the fate of those who gaze at them, spellbound....*(OLF, 81). Your mother never needed to go further than the balcony to find the tragic sanctity of opera.

*"It's not your life story you're telling me, Archangel, but an underground passage of my own, which I was unaware of"* (OLF, 157).

I imagine that if I can help you locate her I can also help you let her go.

One night when you are just a little girl you weep to the moon because you understand that there must have been some cosmic mishap. That you share no identification or allegiance with your home place. That it must have all been a grave celestial error. *Childhood...doesn't care a rap about picture-book fairies and decorative monsters...everyone was a fairy, that is, was isolated by the halo of an unapproachable,*

*inviolable existence...*(OLF, 148). But that sort of grief will not serve you well if you intend to survive. Perhaps I am moving too fast? Let's step back to the beginning:

Grief will not ever serve you. It is much more advisable that you cross your arms over your chest when you get into bed at night. Funereal protection of your heart and wrists may indeed project the idea of safety far enough that it could spread like some big golden spider-web all the way over to the trundle bed next to yours where your mother sleeps. You are light-years away from understanding that your mother is an undiagnosed psychotic and a profoundly abused woman who suffers from manic depression. You couldn't know that you are profoundly sleeping disordered. You know only that you must keep still. If you move around too much your mother will threaten to bind your mouth and hands and put you in a closet till morning. *I should have liked to talk to you about encounters. I have a notion that the moment that provoked—or provokes—them is located outside time, that the shock spatters the surrounding time and space...*(OLF, 156). In the next room your father is crashing from cocaine. You know enough to know that when you hear the sound of his car coming up the driveway you must not wait too long to hide. You know enough to know to bring some toys into the closet to keep you occupied. You know enough to know that he will have forgotten some dollar bills in his work clothes when he threw them on the floor. You know enough to know that if you do not steal those bills you and your mother will not eat tomorrow. You know enough to know that he keeps his paycheck in hundreds in his pocket and comes home broke red-faced and mean. You know enough to duck. So you must know enough to keep still now so that your mother can sleep. Stiller, still, than that.

*I accumulated catastrophes, I provoked accidents along the verticality of the precipice, I summoned up frightful obstacles at the point of arrival....I was slowly sinking (OLF, 141-142).*

Trouble: Each summer you suffer from rather unbearable ear infections. You have learned how to keep still through the night—even decades later you find you sleep best keeping stillness to benefit another—but these ear infections throw you into a misery you have trouble concealing. No matter, your mother calls your doctor and demands Tylenol with codeine and assures him that that is not too drastic for a seven-year old to take. You are lulled with promises of what you will come to call oblivion. *“We have seen cyclists, wrapped in the garlands of the song they whistled, going dizzily down the celestial slope of the hills. We awaited them in the valley, where they arrived in the form of little pats of mud” (OLF, 197).* You take a pill and experience no reprieve. You are devastated. But not nearly as devastated as your mother is. She gives you four more pills and you experience the counter-effects: racing heart, worry, tightening muscles; this you will come to call mid-night. “But that was supposed to work,” you tell her. And indeed “that was supposed to work” will become the trope of your addiction. *It is magnificence seen from without. Though it may be wretched when seen from within, it is then poetic, if you are willing to agree that poetry is the break (or rather the meeting at the breaking point) between the visible and the invisible (OLF, 293).*

You want so much to protect her. You can bear it even if it is at your own expense. You will hit the wrong notes, strum the wrong strings, so she can show you how to play the guitar better and faster and with more mystery mastery mischief. You’ll

encourage her when you hear the clacking of her sharp heels coming to spring you out of school—oftentimes she'll wear a tutu and grin at someone just beyond your shoulder.

*You might have taken her for some mad tragic actress who, unable to reenter her own personality, keeps trying, trying....Let us mention, however, a characteristic event. She wanted to kill herself. To kill herself. To kill my kindness (OLF, 307).*

You hope those moments of musical interlude will end draped in velvet tasseled shawls, packs of tarot cards spread out on the bed, the dint of candles, and motionless feet as you watch her create gypsy boxcar music. You are paralyzed because you do not want to rupture the reverie but are grateful that the both of you have escaped to an astral plane. *I shall have to establish, to regulate, a whole internal astronomy (OLF, 199).* Most nights do not end like this. Though, some do. She is not—nor will she ever be—without magic. You will remember this particularly when you leave her.

In your role of caretaker you will always have trouble discerning “flu” from “manic downswing” but you understand that you are equally responsible for both. Once you forget to kiss her goodnight and you walk back towards your bedroom to find her and your father threatens your life. You understand that you hold the winds for Troy—your caretaking is armor for your mother to brave the demons that trap her in these the hardest days of mind. You do not yet understand that you are Iphigenia.

*It is absolutely essential that I come back to myself (OLF, 199)...*is it possible for you to follow me:

Bob Dylan:

*Far past the frozen leaves*

*The haunted frightened trees*

*Out to the windy bench*

*Far from the twisted reach of crazy sorrow*

I am trying to tell you what happened to you. To make a record so you can begin to make distinctions between imaginary planes and the tangible. I want you to surface the subterranean terror in an effort to free it. I want to tell you that it was real and so are you. But this account is troubled and *I am afraid that it says nothing about the things that haunt me* (OLF, 198).

This account may require an unanticipated level of archival work from me. But you are not without your own reasoning capabilities. I imagine you know that there cannot be any witnesses to what you are enduring. You are familiar with how to spackle the knife holes in the wall before you move apartments. You've given up calling the police, even when your parents take their battles outside. You are able to go to sleepovers with your schoolmates and know how to work yourself into a fever in the middle of the night so that someone will be forced to drive you home. You believe that the night you sleep away from home will be the night that your father kills your mother or your mother kills herself. But I imagine those reasoning capabilities are compromised when your mother falls in love.

*I should like to play at inventing the ways love has of surprising people. It enters like Jesus into the heart of the impetuous; it also comes slyly, like a thief* (OLF, 98). Gene is the epitome of gentleness. Tall and bearded, calm and crystal blue eyes, he teaches you about lizards. Takes you to the town dump where he works and digs for old bottles and together you imagine the messages they must have carried over time. You are thrilled with the secrecy. You imagine that any measure you take for your mother to see him is



worth the risk. So, when your father starts to get suspicious you call the local bar and tell the bartender to send your mother home. You create elaborate stories about how you came to find the animals Gene has given you to care for—and stumble, of course, over “chinchillas.”

Sartre: *Words complete our fantasies, fill in their gaps, support their inconsistency, prolong them, enrich them with what cannot be seen or touched... with words the Other reappears.*

I wish I could tell you that you’ve someone kind to entrust these secrets to, but at this time you’ve only really got one friend, Trouble. *She will go on living only to hasten toward Death (OLF, 305).*

But now you are alone.

One day your father threatens your life if you don’t tell him where the man your “mother is fucking” lives. *Those whose usual climate is violence are simple in relation to themselves.... Yet, what is their violence compared to mine, which was to accept theirs, to make it mine, to wish for it myself, to intercept it, to force it upon myself, to know it, to premeditate it, to discern and assume its perils? (TJ, 16).* You walk down the splintered concrete path until you come to an ivy-covered house and point a small finger—an irredeemable gesture of betrayal—towards the front door. And Gene looks you in the eyes long enough for you to know that he knows you sold him out. *A gaze—and it may be of your own eyes—has the sudden, precise keenness of the extra-lucid, and the order of this world—seen inside out—appears so perfect in its inevitability that this world has*

*only to disappear. That's what it does in the twinkling of an eye (OLF, 256).* You watch as your father cracks his ribs and nose and Gene's body seems flightless and boundless as it disappears into the ivy which you can feel crawling up your legs and it wraps around your heart and eyes and you can feel it creeping around your bowels as your father leaves you there to imbibe destruction. *This story may not always seem artificial, and in spite of me you may recognize in it the call of the blood: the reason is that within my night I shall have happened to strike my forehead at some door, freeing an anguished memory that had been haunting me since the world began. Forgive me for it. This book aims to be only a small fragment of my inner life (OLF, 66).* You touch Gene's bleeding face, this man you'd called "Not-Dad," and realize later that you—the real you—was born in and of his blood. You run for help. You long to reclaim the days of Gene's mystery. Or for Trouble's touch to steal your breath. To go so far deep within that you go above. But *it is another Jean, here, who is telling me his story. I am no longer alone, but I am thereby more alone than ever (OLF, 267).*

Several weeks later a friend walks in as you have a butcher's knife pressed down against your wrist. It is now when we begin to become aligned; we are equalized by the *Frightful moments—which I seek out—when you cannot contemplate either your body or your heart without disgust (OLF, 201).* She threatens to call her mom, a nurse. You reassure her. You recognize the magnitude of a witness and remember the promise of oblivion "that was supposed to work" and think you'll try it once more. *I wanted to swallow myself by opening my mouth very wide and turning it over my head so that it would take in my whole body, and then the Universe, until all that would remain of me would be a ball of eaten thing which little by little would be annihilated: that is how I see*

*the end of the world* (OLF, 85). You discover sleeping pills and make an instant pact that you can get through any day so long as there is even a pinch of oblivion waiting for you at the end of it. *Dehumanizing myself is my own most fundamental tendency* (OLF, 92). You are nine years old and your hands have become vehicles and instigators of terror; you can cope only by therefore inflicting this terror upon yourself. And you find out that sometimes it does really work—for a time.

I understand you in your moments of oblivion seeking. I cannot fathom, without breaking I think, the stasis you maintained between the kindness in your heart and the loss of your ability to honor it. Did it matter much to you, I wonder, what happened next after you believed the world to have ended? I'll tell you anyway; you never have lost your curiosity:

Your mother rips you out of fifth grade once Gene's ribs have healed and you run away. On the lam in crystals and boots and beads you find a charm in the road that you will never again abandon. But before you can understand it, your mother runs once more and takes you back to your father's doorstep. *Without quite seeing where the adventure would lead, but rather as a bird is said to go into a serpent's mouth, she said, not quite voluntarily and in a kind of trance: "Stay." and added hesitantly, "if you want to"* (OLF, 89). You decide that you cannot watch her run back to her ruin nor can you leave her nor would you have had any other place to go so you reach further and further into oblivion. In the grey light of remembrance you can see how many times you've crawled back knowingly to the thing you thought would end you, but at the time you could not understand terror's complacent diplomacy.

Perhaps we should spin the reel forward some? It's sufficient to say you succumbed to oblivion again and again looking for Wonderland. You didn't find that.

*I shall therefore make clear that it is meant to indicate what I am today, as I write it. It is not a quest of time gone by, but a work of art whose pretext-subject is my former life. It will be a present fixed with the help of the past, and not vice versa. Let the reader understand that the facts were what I say they were, but the interpretation that I give them is what I am—now (TJ, 71).*

It was not as if you did not try to run.

*I accumulate rash acts...(TJ, 206)*<sup>2</sup>

You are standing at Jim Morrison's grave when a fellow pilgrim bows to you in an ancient gesture; a genuflection to the god that lives inside of each and every body. *The beauty of a moral act depends on the beauty of its expression...The act is beautiful if it provokes, and in our throat reveals, song (TJ, 22).* You are stunned at the possibility this awakens: hours before you 'd woken up under an overpass in Montmartre with a freshly broken heart and a bottle of champagne. You'd been fairly certain that your condition suggested the preservation of an internal void you'd been taking from place to place in an attempt to run away from it—

Jim Morrison: *Can you picture what will be*

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<sup>2</sup> *But what will prevent my destruction? (TJ, 206)*

*So limitless and free*

*Desperately in need...of some...stranger's hand*

*In a...desperate land*

—until this moment of sanctuary—until a stranger recognized some shred of humanity you'd thought you'd lost—until, in fact, you learned to bow back. As you continued on your way you saw a memory in the ephemeral decorations on the porphyry stones: years before you'd been displaced from a celebration and sought refuge in a Hindu temple.

When you got there you watched a priest bathe a Ganesh icon—he covered it in layers of milk and honey and flowers as everyone sang jubilantly; you learned that during puja the priest touched a cup to the top of your head. The cup represents god's feet—the idea is that if you could pray to be worthy enough to only touch the foot of god, you'd be ok.

And somehow touching those sacred gravestones in exile in Paris reminded you of the path to god's feet. But you couldn't yet understand what it might mean for you to live in a way that aspired to touch or be touched by anything. Years later you try to tell pieces of this story to an actress you dated: you were in Washington Square Park sitting on a purple leopard velvet blanket (a gift from a drag queen who you call your fairy godmother).

When you described the Ganesh ritual the actress suggested you get out of the park and go and honor her body in the same way. It was not the first time you considered the ironic connotations between the ease of the celebration of the body and the hard won rituals you preserve in the hopes of effacing the degradation of your soul.

One day you are at a nudist beach and you see a man walking along the shore: he had ribbons of deer hide tied around a long braid, strands of beaded necklaces hanging down his chest and he held an ornately carved walking stick. Seeing him walk naked into the sun brought a primordial longing to the surface and you touched the arm of your friend and wondered aloud if she agreed that this man might very well be your real father. *I am alone in the world, and I am not sure that I am not the King-perhaps the sprite-of these flowers* (TJ, 44). You've often wondered if you are entitled to the light that you perceive. *If I saw it in the sky of the astronomers, I did so because it was the bold projection there of the one I preserved within myself* (TJ, 70).

On your eighteenth birthday you go to Central Park to a peace rally for what you think is to protest genocide in Darfur. But you are there predominantly to brush up against strangers as you wait to see if you can feel the heat or energy or music or compassion or longing or sweat or force of love or ecstatic heartbeat even in repose but what you feel is a chill that runs down your spine and collects in a pool behind your knees and when you come home you try to dig the veins out of your wrist just to see if you are really real and you wake up and roll a bandana around your wounds and outside in the world people say "hey sister" because no one is surprised to see you walking around with a bandana tied around your arm and even with proof of blood you are unsure of your own reality so you go forward as a ghost. *Nature made me uneasy, my love...delivered me to the elements. But they are malicious. In order to tame them I wanted to contain them. I refused to deny them cruelty; quite the contrary, I congratulated them for having as much as they had, I flattered them* (TJ, 71).

One night you keep repeating, “But Bob Dylan says it don’t matter where you’re going if you know where you came from” as you and your friend keep ending up accidentally in the same place while you’re driving in circles drunkenly looking for a fix in the middle of winter with the top down on his convertible. *In short, the greater my guilt in your eyes, the more whole, the more totally assumed, the greater will be my freedom. The more perfect my solitude and uniqueness* (TJ, 84). It would be the same convertible you took refuge in the first time you tried to stop using drugs and alcohol. You went through your first withdrawal at 19-years-old wrapped in silk shawls with your face pressed against the leather backseat of that convertible...*I know longer knew whether I dwelt in sumptuous destitution or whether my abjection was magnificent* (TJ, 89). But on that circuitous night wandering in a frosty hallucination you thought that the snowflakes looked absolutely remarkable—delicate and holy—as they fell into the car as the police officers kept asking you and your friend where you thought you were running to after they caught you driving 90 miles an hour down a dead-end road...*and I decided that this situation was exceptional, that it has been granted me because no other would have so fulfilled me* (TJ, 96).

You have the windows rolled down and you are playing the radio loud but you cannot make your eyes stay open. *I list the secret wounds* (TJ, 54)... You are on a highway in New Jersey and you can sort of see that you are sort of near a tractor trailer and you know that you should pull over but instead you just let go. *I know the love that passes from fingers into the folds, the holes, the swellings* (TJ, 162). When you come to your car is

diagonal and moments away from hitting the truck. You swerve but you don't stop driving even then because even that has not shook the numb you feel inside. You wished you would have felt your heart race. You wished you did not remember letting go. *We are fallen during the time we bear the marks of the fall, and to be aware of the imposture is of little avail* (TJ, 55).

A month before your twentieth birthday you are working at a sleepaway camp, tucking bottles of Jack Daniels in your camp cubby behind your t-shirts and friendship bracelets and you fall in love with a wild Englishwoman who is the counselor for the next bunk who is the first to call you an alcoholic; your first kiss is on the back of the camp bus moments before you pass out, piss yourself, and she has to carry you to your cabin. You wake up in a pair of knee-high moccasin boots and she comes to your bunk in the morning to scream in your face that she has a girlfriend and why would she throw it away on a drunk. *I then realized how hard it is to reach the light by puncturing the abscess of shame* (TJ, 67). You leave camp early to take care of a suicidal friend and your wild Englishwoman says she will meet you at your home when she finishes her job in a couple of weeks. But then she writes to tell you that she'll come to stay with you only if you don't drink. You spend a week withdrawing under the supervision of friends, in the back of recovery meetings, sweating out buckets of gin so that your pillows are soaked through with Bombay Sapphire and you get it but you can't keep it up for long—because you didn't want help you just wanted her—so your wild Englishwoman comes and your wild Englishwoman goes. *This journal is not a mere literary diversion. The further I progress, reducing to order what my past life suggests and the more I persist in the rigor of*



*composition—of the chapters, of the sentences, of the book itself—the more do I feel myself hardening in my will to utilize, for virtuous ends, my former hardships. I feel their power (TJ, 62).*

You have had too much to drink. You are brutally attracted to danger and so you do not find it surprising when the woman you are in love with drops you off at her husband's house and leaves like she's just planted a landmine and is longing to watch it detonate. *I refuse to take delight in his sufferings if I have not yet shared them. I shall first incur the scorn of men, their judgment (TJ, 213).* You will remember that the dog growled at you. You think about your mom and what she felt when she lost her beloved dog. She was walking around the house with his collar and leash around her neck, threatening to hang herself with it from the rafters in the garage. You tried to talk to her and she said, "It's just that I keep losing him." She believes that their souls have been cosmically linked in the past and keep repeating in different manifestations. She says: "I have been losing him for centuries."

Tom Waits: *What I done to me*

*I done to you*

You decide then, as you look out over coastal crags, wondering about the incarnations of wounding, that he must know anyway and the last thing you remember is complimenting him on the view from his window as you looked for his wife. *With the memory of those brief moments, I could describe to you walks, breathless flights, pursuits, in countries of the world where I shall never go (TJ, 40).*

Once you fell in love when you drunkenly leaned backwards on a jetty and a mystically damaged woman was there to hold you though after she reached out to grab you neither of you moved any further away from the edge. *I had to grab hold of invisible tackle* (TJ, 35). You cannot help but to skirt the precipice. *A more ancient and more Greek Antigone was making me scale a dark, steep cavalry* (TJ, 42). You develop a subsequent magisterial feeling towards the recurrence of cliffs in your relationship with her but each time you leap you end up right back where you began.

Tom Waits: *Sun is up. The world is flat.*

*Damn good address for a rat.*

*My tenderness is of fragile stuff* (TJ, 207). One cool November night when you ran away from home as an itinerant teenager and a truck driver called you over to his rig you walked over with melancholy when you realized that you'd lost the potential to be surprised. *'If something happens,' I said to myself, 'it will be the appearance of a unicorn. Such a moment and such a place can only produce a unicorn'* (TJ, 48).

Expecting a solicitation of the body or intoxication of the mind, he instead has you warm your hands on the grill of his truck and plays you Joni Mitchell as loud as his radio will play it, reads your palm, and asks you to please, get a coat, if you have any interest in surviving the cold. *Then I really felt I was in exile, and my nervousness was going to make me permeable to what—for want of other words—I shall call poetry* (TJ, 53). You are nearly destroyed by the surprise of gentleness.

A tornado will not strike the same spot twice but the chaos of the storm can feel duplicitous. *I awaited a miracle, but a storm was needed to clear the sky (TJ, 157)*. You wonder as to the winds you've been caught in, as to the winds you've been spit out by. One day you wake up (again) in the wrong place and the way that it hits your heart reveals that there is a reserve of gentleness that has not been expurgated. "If that is true," you think, "then I must have been living wrong for a long time." *This reflection saved me from myself (TJ, 47)*. It's because you became so sympathetic to the myth of disintegration. It's because of your profound need for legend. It's because of the truckdriver's crystal blue eyes. But it's because of resilient *shreds of tenderness (TJ, 97)*, really, that you get sober.

*I had the simple elegance, the easy bearing of the hopeless. My courage consisted in destroying all the usual reasons for living and discovering others. The discovery was made slowly (TJ, 175).*

(3)



"Untitled," (Genet) by David Wojnarowicz

Wojnarowicz: *I felt my body thrumming with the sounds of vessels of blood and muscles contracting the sounds of aging and of disintegration—the sound of something made ridiculous with language—the sense of loving and the sense of fear.... I talk inside my head of change and peace for this body beside me of life for this body beside me of belief in these unalterable positions in the shifting state of things; of disbelief, of need for something to suddenly and abruptly take place....* (*Living Close to the Knives*, (86).

I believe I need to tell you something about your experience with entertaining multiple pieces of yourself over time; we can learn to value the fragments along their course of disintegration. You have me now, clean; I want to be the Virgil that did not appear for you sooner.. I wanted to appear to you to keep you safe. I want you to forget Carthage and choose the pyre so that I may be free of you.

Seamus Heaney: *If our given experience is a labyrinth, its impassability can still be countered by the poet's imagining some equivalent of the labyrinth and presenting himself and us with a vivid experience of it* ("Redress of Poetry.")

I'll sing the pieces to bring them to the center:

Barthes: *To write by fragments: the fragments are then so many stones on the perimeter of a circle: I spread myself around: my whole little universe in crumbs; at the center, what?* (92).

There's no gentle way to tell you that you become I and we cannot coexist, ultimately.

Fragment: When I was four days sober for the second time I fell in love with a recovering heroin addict; she had a pink Mohawk and the face of a nun. We talked about Kerouac and Buddhism and animals we'd rescued and generally sobbed after we slept together.

The first time silence broken by tears streaming she said, "the Buddha says...good job."

*(In the form in which I first cast this account, I must have made it serve some moral*

*conclusion, which I no longer remember. I don't feel impelled to rewrite it (TJ, 155). )*

I was fairly certain that seventeen years of substance abuse would not leave me with much to offer, that I might be granted permission to stay on base, but surely there wouldn't be room for any play.

Freud: *We have fixed our attention not on the living matter, but on the forces active in it, and have been led to distinguish two kinds of instincts: those the purpose of which is to guide life towards death, and the others, the sexual instincts, which perpetually strive for, and bring about, the renewal of life (57).*

Fragment: For my birthday she sings to me on stage dressed as a glam rock drag king...*I was the theater of a fairyland restored to life...(TJ, 34).* I was possessive of the layers of clothing that shielded the parts of her body that the crowd was wondering about. We said biological gender meant nothing to us, but each time I pulled men's clothing off from her body the reward of her femininity was almost more than I could bear.

*Cixous: You, as I see you when I see you as you really are: and to do this I have to draw the curtains aside, to slaughter you, to open you up—(with my gaze only). And then, naturally, it is me that I see, it is us, nude, it is our nudity, magnificent. Our power bound, our shining blindness (19).*

Fragment: Once a week we sleep on an air mattress in an empty room in an apartment near the projects at our HIV positive friend's place because though the government provides him with a rent subsidy and food stamps and health care they cannot provide him with a mandate of companionship. He tells us of a young boy who comes to see him from time to time and though we inwardly cringe while we sit on his sofa—their space of love—I manage to ask whether he and Lolita share a common language? They do not.

Fragment: Once we were driving out to Long Island to see her father. She'd only recently got a driver's license—it had been her gift to the world to not drive when she was at the height of her teenage heroin addiction. She stopped the car just over the George Washington Bridge, in the middle of traffic, to consult her GPS. She moved back into traffic, unperturbed by all of the honking, and somewhere along the way the Doors came on the radio. I told her that when I was a freshman in college my mother was being treated for breast cancer and I was her primary caregiver. I had exactly one friend at the time, Amanda; I picked her because her hair was longer than mine, she loved Edna St. Vincent Millay, and didn't judge the velvet fringed jacket that I'd adopted as my cape of protection—it belonged to my mom. Amanda and I made bongs out of apples, shamelessly denounced our over-achieving private school peers as we blew smoke into

each other's mouths, and talked about poetry. Once when I was driving around with Amanda I put on the Best of the Doors and she rioted: "I can't listen to the Doors because Jim Morrison was such a womanizer."

"Ok, well, what do you like to listen to?"

"The Rolling Stones."

"Right, Mick Jagger, feminist."

She loved hearing this story and turned the Doors up a little louder; she always welcomed my contradictions. *No doubt it was much later that I decided to develop and exploit the many feelings of ambiguity wherein, with mingled shame and delight, I discovered that I was an abode and jumble of contradictions, but I already sensed that it is for us to declare what will serve as a principles (TJ, 188).* The next day the Doors came on the radio again and she said, "oh, I can't listen to this, Jim Morrison was such a womanizer." And I launched right back into the same story—the manic depressive mother, acid-laced college friend, my longing for a place in the world. "I know honey, that's why I said it, remember you told me yesterday?" I did not. Moments like these began to repeat themselves with more and more frequency. And Jim Morrison became our bold Sherpa, our clause for braving my diminished memory with laughter.. When I began to repeat myself she'd say, "you know, Jim Morrison was SUCH a womanizer." And I'd stop and say, "Fucking Jim Morrison, he's the fucking worst."

Jim Morrison: *Can you give me sanctuary?*

*I must find a place to hide*

*A place for me to hide*

*Can you find me soft asylum?*

*I can't make it anymore*

But I began to wonder then, what it means to be granted the grace to continue on in a world that runs like grains of sand through your palms. I began to wonder if it is possible to participate in something that I could not hold on to.

Barthes: *...because you pass through all the fringes of the phantom, the specter: you unite in yourself supposedly distinctive features which henceforth no longer distinguish anything; you discover that you are at one and the same time (or alternately) obsessive, hysterical, paranoiac, and perverse to the last degree (not to mention certain erotic psychoses)...*(144).

*“Everything has happened in us because we are ourselves, always ourselves, and never one minute the same” (Diderot, Refutation d’Helvetius).*

Fragment: We were driving up and down the winding road of our favorite mountain because it was the first snowfall of the season and the light on the auburn leaves was a brutal singe of beauty and we were nearly incommunicable as we tried to grasp such a loss. In the morning I could find no trace of snow and I was in the throes of accepting the diminished capacity of my memory and I couldn’t tell if I was real or a residual hallucination of the oblivion I chased for so long. I walked to the top of the mountain and found that the tallest trees had the faintest traces of snow and I called and whispered through the phone “so it was all real then?” *My effort—as often, and especially since that*



*time—to be stronger than I was, to overcome my natural disposition, to lie about it, had made me utter a remark which, though spoken calmly, was a provocation (TJ, 264).*

When I got home I saw that she left me a note, “can one ever really be sure of anything?”...*I was afraid to continue to be myself that I might more easily melt into that kindness (TJ, 90).*

Fragment: Her dad fell in the bathroom—and though he lives with her brother, brother’s girlfriend and their two children—his pride is fierce and he won’t open the bathroom door and stays in there for sixteen hours until the paramedics come and cut the door down with an axe and take him to the hospital. We go to see him at home and the two children run out of a marijuana filled basement with dirty hair and ripped clothes and we pick them up and crawl into a tattered recliner, all four of us, and hold each other. And I think that the muscles in her arms have never looked as beautiful as they do holding these children, that need. Her arms were tan and golden as she pulled the children closer to us, but those same muscles would not be strong enough to hold her head above water after we left.

Cixous: *There is this question of the speed with which things happen around the edges of your heart—and that’s my concern. To escape a predator, a lion, the deer runs faster than itself, it runs with a force greater than it has. That’s zoological fact: it produces surplus energy. It goes beyond its forces to survive. And it survives the predator, but it doesn’t survive the effort. The lion has been left behind, but the deer dies. It survives and dies from it (65).*

Fragment: It is the time before my mom devolved completely beyond repair so we go to visit. My mother hands her a pendulum so that they can both grasp something tangible that can make decisions in their better interests of which they have no grasp. More time with her has revealed that her and my mother have the same brand of mental illness, the same mood disorder, the same despondency. And so a pendulum would mean that they neither of them would have to rely any longer on the inner workings of their manic minds and both of them look transfixed as I begin to weep at the spinning lapis lazuli. *It is the condition so bitterly sought by creatures without glory; itself is glory; it is...above all, the gaze of our own image in an ideal mirror which shows us as eternally resplendent (until the dying away of the light which will bear our names (TJ, 210))*. I know that because I do not share confidence in the stone's promise of absolution I can neither save them nor participate in their redemption. It is not the first time I have wished to believe in crystal promises. "It's beautiful," I say.

Cixous: *Tragedy is all the more tragic in that it is sober and elliptical. The peak of tragedy is the posthumous inscription, the impossible dialogue between the still living and the scarcely dead. Icarus, he said: he saw the feathers in the water. This is the answer. Performatively (142).*

Fragment: It is the anniversary of the day that she was arrested and she cannot bring herself to face the same day twice so she stays in bed all day and through the night. We are wearing dirty flannel shirts that we've pulled out of a suitcase we've been living out

of in Brooklyn but she is actually still on the floor of her prison refusing life-saving insulin and waiting for release. *Within herself she ordained an altar where she preserved the idea of monster (TJ, 28).* And months later we both understand that she cannot accept the reprieve that she's been granted. And it is only possible for me to show up for her in fragments. So that is where I left her—on a cold cement floor that she had never *really* gotten away from. *I make of sacrifice, rather than of solitude, the highest virtue. It is the creative virtue par excellence. There must be domination in it (TJ, 215).*

And it was not the first time that I left her<sup>3</sup>:

Cixous: *Take the living instant with the closest and the most delicate words. Without words as witnesses the instant (will not have been) is not. I do not write to keep. I write to feel. I write to touch the body of the instant with the tips of the words (195).*

This is how I lost her:

When you called your voice sounded hoarse because you had a noose tightly wound around your neck. You called either to say goodbye or to reinvoké our sacred caretaking bond begun when we were children begun in the nights we gauged whose house was safer to sleep in begun in the clumsy explorations of each other's clumsier bodies begun in the smoke we blew into each other's

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<sup>3</sup> *The reader is informed that this report on my inner life or what it suggests will only be a song of love. To be exact, my life was the preparation for erotic adventures (not play) whose meaning I now wish to discover. Alas, heroism is what seems to me most charged with amorous properties, and since there are no heroes except in our minds, they will therefore have to be created. So I have recourse to words. Those which I use, even if I attempt an explanation by means of them, will sing. Was what I wrote true? False? Only this book of love will be real. What of the facts which served as its pretext? I must be their repository. It is not they that I am restoring (TJ, 100).*

mouths for quicker trips out begun in the indomitable faith founded in mutual childhood experimentation with the occult begun in the one inviolable trust of one woman's body over another's.

I asked you so many frantic questions—*But I refrained from saying more. Had I gone on in this tone, I would have admitted not only to a passing fancy but to so deep a love that it would have wounded...* (TJ, 191)—and simultaneously waved a young Asian waitress over to my table, “Jameson, please” but she made only an inquisitive face as I asked “Where are you?” and I looked at the waitress and pleaded “Jam-e-son—neat” and she only shrugged her shoulders as I begged you not to leave me and as the waitress put a tumbler full of sake on my table you gasped for breath and said, “Jesus, give me a second, I can't breathe” and we laughed a gallows humor as the noose loosened and you regained your breath and my throat burned in sympathy and I quit my job and drove back to you to try to make it better.

It is difficult to “make it better” for someone.

I tried to keep a steady stream of oblivion running for us but we were on a fast track. One day you said you swallowed ten sleeping pills with a bottle of wine. Three days later you said you were in the hospital for an overdose. I panicked. Asked you what you took. Regretful that we were in this pattern of vicious repetition again, only with such a short span of grace in between catastrophes. You told me you hadn't taken anything since the other day and I became furious because we didn't live in a world where you could recycle your overdoses; if it didn't get you then I was in the spirit of trying again.

“They’re going to put me in a padded room” you said.

Maybe that’s for the best I said maybe I don’t have the right degree to do this I said maybe just this one time when you’re in someone else’s hands I can recognize that these hands, my hands, have not served you well I said maybe you’re more beautiful than you will ever realize but I said maybe I can’t do this and maybe I said goodbye as white coats put you in a white jacket and I said maybe I couldn’t ever look back and I said maybe I wouldn’t make it much further anyway. *Solitude is not given to me; I earn it. I am led to it by a concern for beauty. I want to define myself in it, delimit my contours, emerge from confusion, set myself in order (TJ, 243).*

This is how I lost her:

*If I cannot have the most brilliant destiny, I want the most wretched, not for the purpose of a sterile solitude, but in order to achieve something new with such rare matter (TJ, 244).* Because you met your husband in AA you thought it would be best if you kept your beer in my family’s fridge. Sometimes you would knock on the front door. Most days, I would find your dog Daisy running through our house. Some days, when you walked through the door you’d say something like, “his tongue is like a cat’s,” and you’d walk past me and look for my mom. Most days, you would stop for one of those beers. But in the way of things, you and I got to talking, as neighbors usually do. And then I started to notice that most afternoons, when I came home from work, you’d already be sitting in our

backyard. And we'd talk about lots of things. And we'd have one of those beers together. Then two. Then three.

Oh, but when I looked at you I had visions of the hope I felt in my childhood with my best friend. Memories of learning to conduct a séance. Working for absolution with a Ouija board. Sitting for hours with a clandestine candle praying in the only language we had for a spirit greater than ourselves and greater than the ones around us to take us far from this place. You live for me still in those early memories of the occult.

When you came over to have my mom read your tarot cards I would generally stay downstairs and hope that you would sit outside with me before you left. *As love is exalted in perilous situations, secretly within me I offered to share the exile's Siberia (TJ, 73)*. Even though I knew that after 5pm the chances of you speaking coherently became unlikely. Even though I knew that you wouldn't remember our confessions to each other. Even though I knew that neither of us could actually save the other from ourselves. *All this beauty, however, is meant for me. I am registering it, and I know that it is so conspicuous in order to show how woebegone I am*. But one evening, you asked me if I would sit with you before my mom read your tarot cards. And as we sat down in the shadow of my mother's piano, surrounded by candles, I could see that your hair was beginning to thin more and more, though you covered it with a bandana. By the light of the candles I could see your collarbone jutting out of your chest. By the light of the candles I could see those two little girls who would wait for signs in the dark night. By the light of those candles I knew that you just needed to hear that it

would get better one day. What I should have done is to make my own cards and lay them out for you. They should have read, “You will be kinder to yourself.” “You are so loved.” “You are not the sum of your parts, but your pasts, and I think you’re pretty cool.” But instead, that night, you took my hand and whispered, “You will never know that you are beautiful, but you deserve better.” One day my mom saw you walking outside and said, “Oh God it’s everywhere, it’s been following her for days.” You had been in rehab eight times for heroin. You had starved your body for literally decades. And after all of it, one day your heart just gave out. You died just days after my mom saw whatever it was that she saw surrounding you. *...I find myself in exile.*

I think at that point that you had tried to leave your husband. I think at that point that your daughter lived permanently with her father. I think at that point that you had stopped letting Daisy outside. I think at that point you may have already felt the arresting cold inside. I think you may have felt it for some time, some long time before your life ended.

I used to think about you when I drank Dewar’s in the blues club in the village like we talked about. I used to think about you when I went to visit my parents in those old patio chairs. I used to think about you actually being full of hope. But instead I think about you trusting that it would get better. Instead I think about you not being able to be kinder. Instead I think about you who will never know that you are beautiful but deserve better.

This is how I lost her:

We fucked in unlikely places: alleyway, pool table, Midwest.

*I made up my mind to live with my head bowed and to pursue my destiny toward darkness, in an opposite direction to yours, and to exploit the underside of your beauty* (TJ, 98).

Bleary-eyed in a borrowed Cadillac we make promises to each other when I drive you to the airport, but those promises are not strong enough to hold anything more than catastrophe.

Stuck in traffic on the Verrazano Bridge on the way back from the airport, I listen to a cd you made me—an adolescent gesture that bridges our 25-year age gap—to comfort me in your absence. I pull over and weep when “Rock and Roll Suicide,” our song, comes on:

David Bowie: *oh, give me your hands...give me your hands*

It was to be the last time I saw you but not the last time I had to leave you.

This is how I lost her:



Each loss is all some neo-primordial recreation of “is it over yet did mommy put down the knife” anyway.

*...I refuse to live for any other end than the very one which I found to contain the first misfortune: that my life must be a legend, in other words, legible, and the reading of it must give birth to a certain new emotion which I call poetry. I am no longer anything, only a pretext.* Five-years-old began a series of regular scenes of lying down on the floor and talking to a locked bathroom door and hoping you could still hear me asking you to put the knife down. I waited for a series of sounds and lights: the crisp blade falling to the floor, if no blood then safety, the sound of the door unlocking, the sound of sobbing my only proof that you were alive, and the sound of the kitchen drawer closing after I coaxed you out of the bathroom and returned the knife. Though sometimes I kept it under my pillow, just to be sure you wouldn't change your mind if I fell asleep. *Here I draw attention to one of those lacerations—horrible, for I shall provoke them despite the danger—by which beauty was revealed to me (TJ, 18).*

Once you walked out of your room bleeding, black silk nightgown, pleading “I can't get it to stop” and I kept it a secret that the baby you lost wasn't my father's. But later you'd tell me, “he killed your brother” and I thought you were jeopardizing our secret until you told me one night as you held your spirit board in one hand and tapped messages to ghosts on your leg with the other that there was a baby who came before me; illegally aborted at seven months. I don't ask you but: why was I the one to survive?

The child I saw you lose died because your blood was incompatible with its blood; you were poisoning each other. Visions of Clytemnestra's dream. One or the other. The Furies continue until they are asked to stop.

Years later in a parking lot apologizing to a truck driver that we only followed him to the scrapyard because you thought he was communicating a message to you via his headlights and that message was corroborated by the secret messages you heard on the radio.

Years later I pack some books and a yoga mat and my friends move me out of your house in the middle of the night and no one knows where I'm going and later you won't be able to understand why I left even though you have actively tried to kill me and no authorities because of the myths of the system ingrained in me from childhood. Just a separation by:

*Kafka: the axe that breaks the frozen sea inside.*

And for a day you beg me to come back and can't bear the thought of losing a daughter you cannot bear to look at and I say "no" and you say "ok, have a nice day" and I don't hear from you again.

*I said the only criterion for an act is its elegance (TJ, 242).* Every loss after has only been an echo of a primal rejection that will numb what it cannot destroy. And if we are made to recreate it, let us at least then retain the opera capes, the floods of light, the waves at night, the tears shed over smoky incense, the fine line

between the repetition or the curtain—if we are to remain for an act that only repeats what has come before it like some candlelight processional to the inorganic material that predates us, let us at least do so beautifully. (...*Perhaps love, the better to create me, acquainted me with those elements which summon forth the heady words that are used to name them: cults, ceremonials, visitations, litanies, royalty, magic....By such a vocabulary, by the amorphous universe which it offers and which I contained, I was dispersed, annihilated*).

This is how I want to lose you:

After we visited your dad that day in Long Island, the first glimpse of my failing memory shining on the George Washington Bridge, the void heroin left in your adolescence evanesced in your new driving skills in New York traffic, we drove out to Montauk. It was winter and it was dark. There was a fork in the road and it looked like one path led to town and one path led to darkness. You chose darkness. You pulled the car over like you'd been there before and found a small rocky path, which had obviously been divinely reserved for us. You led the way down and down, past the dunes, into the chilled sand. All we could see was a vast stretch of stars and ocean and the fog of our breaths as we stared in wonder. *All the wonders I beheld made me uneasy, but I hardened myself further so as to penetrate, without danger to myself, their customary mystery* (TJ, 119). You couldn't speak. I put our jackets down in the sand and we lay down and I started talking to you about various constellations: Cassiopeia, Orion, the Seven Sisters.

Our hands barely grazed each other's. I told you I felt like I'd never seen the stars before that night. You told me you used to think that someone had just punched holes in a big black canvas. We stayed there, waves crashing at our feet, hearts skipping, frozen, for a long while...*I realized what my love was; on the basis of this awareness I established relationships with the world; this was the birth of intelligence (TJ, 131).* And then we drove home. Later, when you began to cry I said, "Would it help to know that I'm going to say 'yes'?"

The edges of this departure have been blurred. There's still mornings when I wake up and before I open my eyes I believe that you are there. Maybe you are. *Since going into mourning means first submitting to a sorrow from which I shall escape, for I transform it into the strength necessary for departing from conventional morality... (TJ, 222).* So I'll ask that just this one time we let the leaving be under the stars. And just this one time let's not think about the time we failed each other. The inadequacy of our hands. The faltering belief in each other. Just this one time, I'll ask that I can leave you in Montauk: frozen breath, broken shells, grazing touch, and every star out in the sky.

And now do you see, how I lost you?

If I were to tell you that loss is the only thing that eradicates fragmentation would you be consoled that it is the only vessel which can bring you wholeness? Would you believe I reached out to you to ask if you'd allow yourself to be consumed?

You knew only how to maintain a second self; I've learned what it means to slaughter it. *But am I being clear? (TJ, 268).*

(4)

It's just that the act of living as one's double takes a peculiar sort of documentation; there is an insistent vacillation between what has been permitted internally and what is available to be recognized by the outside world. If I cannot remember, wholly, who I have lost what I am left with is my phantom recollection; again, I find myself with myself. To recall trauma is to always be on the frontier of the unsayable; but memory makes us recognize the inherent paradox of the traumatic reality: that there was never a witness (even if we were surrounded by others) and that we are consequently never one again. After trauma, we split our selves so that each part can be assigned a task at survival. One self remembers. One self persistently forgets. One self hides shame. The other salvages it. When I read Genet, I see the struggle to find a language for an unregulated internal cosmos. I see a virginity—an unpunctured, unrattled, nearly unacceptable—gentleness that is not so much a dialogue with the outside world, but a dialogue between two selves: the self that suffered and the self that survived. How we reconcile the two depends entirely upon our ability to embrace fracture.

Sartre writes: [Genet] derives at least one advantage from his orphan's solitude: his inner life is not socialized....Alone, without words, without a secret witness, he lives with himself in a state of concubinage...In becoming an object of concern

to an infinite being, Genet will acquire the being which he lacks. He will be saint, since he is not a son. (11)

In his first two novels, which this work will examine, Genet first frames the story of a sexually dichotomous—though Divine—prostitute to reveal not the impossibility of living with two selves, but the impossibility of having each self be satisfied. In his second novel, *A Thief's Journal*, Genet poses brutal exposition, a litany of revelations and confessions about his time as thief, but where is he? Hidden beneath the confession, we recognize that no matter what he exposes something—perhaps the something left on the frontier of the unsayable—is not transmittable to an outside ear. As reader—as witness—to this story, we must be comfortable that the revelation only deepens the mystery. Though perhaps in the traces of the patterns of doubles in these first two novels, we can name at least the implications of a double life.

In Genet's first novel *Our Lady of the Flowers*, written while he was in prison, it is only after drag queen, prostitute, glamorously destitute Divine wishes to accept herself as fundamentally “bad,” that she takes an action to corroborate the wish. She is looking for tangible brutality to irremediably signify the “bad” she has seen both reflected in and inflicted on her soul:

...her balcony, which was on the ninth floor of an apartment house, looked down on a paved court. The iron railing was latticed, but across it was stretched a wire netting. One of her neighbors had a two-year-old baby girl

to whom Divine used to give candy and who occasionally came to visit her. The child would run to the balcony and look at the street through the netting. One day, Divine made up her mind: she detached the netting and left it leaning against the railing. When the little girl came to see her, she locked her in and ran downstairs. When she got to the yard, she waited for the child to go and play on the balcony and lean against the railing. The weight of her body made her fall into the void. From below, Divine watched. None of the child's pirouettes was lost on her. (OLF 308).

I imagine it to be relatively impossible to castigate one's self into "inherent" badness,; the very wish of it undoes the possibility. The exploration of the double in Divine, then, is a self that wants to be bad and a self that cannot permit it, though she tries.

Sartre calls *Our Lady of the Flowers* "the epic of masturbation" (10). And indeed, Our Lady's structure is both onanistic and pendulomic; the reader joins Genet in an eroticized recounting of terror, depravity, wit, and a beauty that persists despite itself—until Genet is satisfied. I think the onanistic recalling is rather like the balcony scene; he'll show us "filth," in an effort to prove he is filthy, but the very act of trying to name this reveals its opposite. Watch how Genet frames Our Lady, those "dream-words, dreams of words"(Sartre 11); literally, he has cut pictures of criminals out of newspapers and pasted them on his wall behind the prison regulation sign to conjure his story. Literally, Genet frames his story by first defining the prism by which he has surrendered

to narrative: “Using the same beads with which the prisoners next door make funeral wreaths, I have made star-shaped frames for the most purely criminal. In the evening, as you open your window to the street, I turn the back of the regulations sheet toward me. Smiles and sneers, alike inexorable, enter me by all holes I offer, their vigor penetrates me and erects me. I live among these pits. They watch over my little routines, which, along with them, are all the family I have and my only friends” (64).

My question is this: why the beads in star-shaped frames?

My question is this: in the scene of the child’s death, why did he first write about the candy exchange?

Sartre writes, “The emotional pattern begets the image, and in the image Genet, like an analyst, discovers the emotional pattern”(31). It is the emotional pattern of a persistent vacillation between terror and beauty—the irremediable double, the gentleness in spite of terror, the profound tension between what is revealed and what is kept hidden even during brutal exposition—that complicate Genet’s images; the very images which both create and reflect the internal pattern, the same images, he suggests, that are only “pretexts” anyway. Sartre writes, “Genet sees himself everywhere; the dullest surfaces reflect his image; even in others he perceives himself, thereby bringing to light their deepest secrets. The disturbing theme of the double, the image, the counterpart, the enemy brother, is found in all his works” (7). Genet’s work brings secret depths to the



surface, and it is through that surface that he can maintain a tension between exposition and concealment. Because the depths that he reveals are very often not his own, but ours.

I think of the images of Genet at a protest with Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs and I think that perhaps Genet's songs from prison were a primal howl. "I'm with you in Rockland..."; a reaching out from the depths. And the mystery of it, indeed the magic and the terror, is that we can hear him, because we have been there too.

To trace the emotional pattern of the double, let us begin by considering Divine; I would like to pose that Genet's first protagonist inhabited the body of a woman so that Genet could have access to the language of the humiliation of the body, reclaim a genesis/mother myth through marginalized physical ambiguity, and retain gentleness in the wake of brutality. If there needs to be two selves to survive trauma or the memory of it, is it possible that one of those selves can retain glamor?

The reader of *Our Lady of the Flowers* is granted permission to enter this story with Genet only by first accepting that the story is over before we begin: Genet is imprisoned and gives us Divine by means of conjuring ephemeral delight but Divine is dead, "departed as she would have desired, in a mixture of fantasy and sordidness" (80). Before we begin, we understand that we can't fix this...but just as soon as we accept her death Divine is resurrected in an incandescent light:

Divine appeared in Paris to lead her public life about twenty years before her death....That evening she was wearing a champagne silk short-sleeved

blouse, a pair of blue trousers stolen from a sailor, and leather sandals....

Here is a portrait of her: her hair is brown and curly; with the curls spilling over her eyes and down her cheeks, she looks as if she were wearing a cat-o'-nine-tails on her head. Her forehead is somewhat round and smooth.

Her eyes sing, despite their despair, and their melody moves from her eyes to her teeth, to which she gives life, and from her teeth to all her movements, to her slightest acts, and this charm, which emerges from her eyes, unfurls in wave upon wave, down to her bare feet. Her body is fine as amber. Her limbs can be agile when she flees from ghosts. At her heels, the wings of terror bear her along. She is quick, for in order to elude the ghosts, to throw them off her track, she must speed ahead faster than her thought thinks. (82)

Divine is, biologically, a man who lives and dresses as a woman; a prostitute who cares for Darling, her pimp; a soul interred in the present which is mired in waves of a past that cannot be escaped; a woman who exudes gentleness so much so that she cannot rid herself of it—singing eyes and an amber body—;and whose body is fueled by the terror which it tries to escape. Sartre writes, “Throughout *Our Lady* it both makes and rejects itself, observes and knows itself, is unaware of itself, plays tricks on itself and encumbers itself everywhere, even in the relapses. On every page it is born of its opposite, and at the very moment it leads Genet to the borderline of awakening it leaves on the paper the

sticky traces of the most monstrous dream” (12). I wonder what it means to capture a radiance that you cannot hold on to; I wonder what it means to have to manufacture a light that can contain your reflection; if you see yourself in even and all of the dullest of surfaces, are you everywhere or nowhere?

For Genet, that enigmatic radiance makes Divine holy: “I toss of helter-skelter, at random, the following notes, in which you, by unscrambling them, will try to find the essential form of the Saint” (303). Is it possible to trace the language of duplicity through the story of a heathen martyr? Or, as Genet will ask time and time again, is the double authentic and the authentic a double? How can we rid ourselves of a tenderness that preserves humanity in the wake of said humanity’s self-destruction? Sartre writes, “*Our Lady of the Flowers* is the most pessimistic of books. With fiendish application it leads human creatures to downfall and death. And yet, in its strange language it presents this downfall as a triumph. The rogues and wretches of whom it speaks all seem to be heroes, to be of the elect. But what is far more astonishing, the book itself is an act of the rashest optimism” (9).

In *Our Lady*, Divine falls in love with Darling who falls in love with Our Lady so Divine loves Gorgui who loves Our Lady all in the murderous Montmartre garret that Divine reigns over as her kingdom persistently rebels. On the night that Gorgui and Our Lady consummate their relationship—in Divine’s bed:

Divine would like to weep with rage, to tear cambric handkerchiefs with her nails and teeth. Then, a former state resembling the present one suddenly recalled the following: “She was in Spain, I believe. Kids were chasing her and screaming ‘Mariconas’ and throwing stones at her. She ran to a sidetrack and climbed into an empty train. The kids continued from below to insult her and pepper the doors of the train with stones. Divine crouched under a seat, cursing the horde of children with all her might, hating them until she rattled with hatred. Her chest swelled out; she longed for a sigh so as not to choke with hatred. Then she realized it was impossible to devour the kids, to rip them to pieces with her teeth and her nails, as she would have liked, so she loved them. The pardon gushed forth from her excess of rage, of hatred, and she was thereby appeased.” (231)

Divine’s grief reminds us of the body’s place in the slow degradation of the soul—its complacent humiliation, resiliency pasted in beaded frames on the prison wall. Cixous famously cited Genet as one of the few examples of men who write *l’écriture féminine* (“Laugh of the Medusa”). What does the casing of the female form do for Divine’s profound suffering at the hands of men? But more so—what does Divine’s body as feminine re (fuge)/(ceptacle) do for Genet? How does Genet’s celebration of the convict’s brutally erotic physicality complicate his narrative voice—which embraces phallogocentrism by defining itself as its other? *Our Lady of the Flowers* is an exhibition

of homosexual onanism explored through the prism of Divine's ambiguous body; and Divine's feminine body allows Genet access into a narrative of humiliation and shame that he can reclaim with beaded frames, rework into a "sticky traces of the most monstrous dream." Do we need to be kind to each part of the fractured self? Or are we made rather to believe that not all of those selves can survive the survival?

What does it mean that a writer who was pardoned from a lifetime incarceration by the urgent request of a group of French intellectuals (Sartre, Cocteau, and Foucault namely) personifies the feminine though he excludes it?

...How could Divine come to love again and again? And if in her reflection Genet sees himself, at what point did Genet become Divine and Divine become Genet?

I think that it is possible that Divine is neither a reduction of the feminine nor a celebration of the masculine, but rather, I think that Divine is a permission to renegotiate what we have the capacity to see, to feel, and most importantly, to document. Divine's residual tenderness—"scraps of tenderness" as Genet calls them—in the wake of monstrous duality is evidence of what it must take to encapsulate a narrative that has no name, no language, no precedent of form, and no encouragement of expression. With his initial naming of Divine and the celebration of her tragedy in beautiful form, Genet has braved the silence of his own personal trauma—as orphan, as thief, as unbearably "safe," (he could not write for years after he was pardoned) and filled a void with the personification of a feminine vacuity.

Sartre writes that Genet's childhood was marred by a severe doubleness: he was taken into foster care where he was part of the homeplace by virtue of being outside of it; where kindness was challenging to accept because it was mandated; where the early brimmings of his homosexual desires cast him further and further from the kingdom. Sartre writes that Genet went through a constant oscillation between metamorphoses; Genet both "lives in terror lest the original crisis recur..." (2) or: "These metamorphoses fascinate him. He fears them and lives only for them. ... In each case we shall find the paradox of the before and after, a rise and fall, a life staked on a single card, the play of the eternal and the fleeting" (4).

As Divine watched the child dance along the edge of the precipice, "she was superhuman, to the point of—without tears or cries or shudders—gathering with her gloved fingers what remained of the child. She was given three months of preventive custody for involuntary manslaughter, but her goodness was dead. For: "What good would it do me to be a thousand times good now? How could this inexpiable crime ever be redeemed? So, let us be bad." Indifferent, so it seemed, to the rest of the world, Divine was dying" (308).

Is to be bad to no longer feel pain?

If Divine is Genet, then surely Genet is Divine. And Divine's story is a miming of the feminine: in bodily form, in the sexual power and subsequent humiliation of her aging body ("You will be surprised to see Divine growing in age and sensitivity, whereas the

common notion is that the older one gets, the thicker one's skin becomes. She was no longer ashamed, obviously, of being a queen for hire. If need be, she would have boasted of being one who lets jissom flow through her nine holes. It was all the same to her if men and women insulted her. (Until when?) But she lost control of herself, became crimson, and almost failed to pull herself together without a scandal. She clung to dignity" (246); in her precarious relationship to precarious men ("Divine loves her man. She bakes pies for him and butters his roasts. She even dreams of him if he is in the toilet. She worships him in any and all positions" (95)).; and in her ultimate redemption through the Dumasian consumptive death in a Paris garret; Divine lives in Verdi—Divine is Camille. Divine is a permission slip for Genet to explore the persistence of gentleness in the wake of horror; perhaps this is a working definition of the role of the feminine in narrative—an elegant hollow, re-creation of an internal abscess of want, of vacuity, of lack of signification and inescapable marginality. Sartre writes, "As Divine, he projects all his masochism, his vainglorious desire for martyrdom. As Divine, he has the disturbing and voluptuous experience of aging; he "realizes his dreadful fear of growing old. She is the only one of his creatures whom he does not desire....Divine is an ambiguous character who serves both to bring his entire life into focus in the lucidity of his gaze and to let him plunge more deeply into sleep, to sink to the depths of a cosy horror, to drown in his opera" (14). Genet certainly uses Divine as an opportunity to rewrite his own genesis myth; that is of course the significance of the balcony scene.

Sartre writes, “How will this abstract child react to his double exile? By a miming of being and having, in short, by playing games, like all children. He will have two favorite games, saintliness and pilfering” (10). Divine becomes a saint by her inability to rid herself of saintliness; she becomes irrevocably “bad,” by killing the child, but cannot be wholly bad because of her wish to name her condition. Not only has Genet tried to obliterate the vestiges of his own childhood abandonment—but he has ranked the harming of the child as the single non-negotiable signifier of “badness.” Divine perhaps is neither male nor female, herself nor Genet, but simply a language for multiplicity, personified:

...I sometimes have the complex face of Divine, who is herself, first and at times simultaneously, in her features and gestures, the imaginary and yet so real creatures of election with whom, in strict privacy, she has contentions, who torture and exalt her but who allow her no rest and give her, by subtle contractions of wrinkles and the quiverings of her fingers, that disquieting air of being multiple, for she remains silent, as shut as a tomb and, like a tomb, peopled by the unclean. (266)

I am interested in how Divine’s female body is an ambiguous refuge because it allowed Genet to create and enact such boundaries of “bad”; what boundaries of the treacherous are permissible solely through the recumbent exposition of the female form? Irigaray writes:



To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the “perceptible” of “matter”—to “ideas,” in particular to ideas about herself that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make “visible,” by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover up of a possible operation of the feminine in language (qtd. in Butler, *Bodies the Matter* 47).

Does Genet embody *l'écriture féminine* because he uses writing as a site to recover exploitation and can he achieve this through the body of a woman who is biologically a male who is dead before she is resurrected agile before crippled by vanity and “good” because she tries so hard to be bad?

I think if the citation of the damaged story through the duplicitous female body in the “epic of masturbation” is a sort of participation in a story that needs reworking because the terms for it are yet unavailable, then Genet achieves *l'écriture féminine* precisely because he is working at naming on the precipice of the unsayable—intentional or not, his story participates in the need for linguistic mimicry precisely because of its inherent marginalization. There’s simply no epic to cite here, no genesis of the homosexual thief’s master narrative, so Genet mimes in order to show paradox: I am part of your story by virtue of being outside of it; I use your words to create myself who has

never yet been created. And I think that that mimicry is the least fragmented action Genet takes, because at bottom it is a dialogue with the outside world, and despite the mysteries of his texts, the texts themselves are a wish to be understood in communicable terms.

Genet creates order—the terms of his world—in which he centers himself, a world where Divine could be queen and her pimp could be darling. But what is it precisely, then, that Genet seeks to reclaim? And whose terms does he need to mimic to achieve it? After Genet was pardoned, after Sartre published his study *Saint Genet*, Genet did not write for multiple years; just as soon as his identity as thief was sanctioned, was pardoned, it separated him from an identity he had chosen for thirty years—what's left is what wrote. In his autobiographical novel *The Thief's Journal*, Genet poses, in a footnote, "...since there are no heroes except in our minds, they will therefore have to be created. So I have recourse to words. Those which I use, even if I attempt an explanation by means of them, will sing. Was what I wrote true? False? Only this book of love will be real. What of the facts which served as its pretext? I must be their repository. It is not they that I am restoring" (100).

Can a repository of the unnameable sing?

A pretext is the double self made whole. As we make our way through the terrible oscillations of brutality and terror and treachery and wonder and phantasmagoria, we make contact with Genet through Divine's search for bottom and in *The Thief's Journal*

we reconcile brutal exposition—the lice and tricks and violence—with an irrevocable mourning for the Genet that we could not possibly touch—though he is so close! If Genet offers a pretext for his life through his writing, then what can we glean from his writing but a further complication of the riddle of remembrance? Of the riddle of the possibility of representation? Of the labels: “thief,” “sanctioned...” which we are marred, condemned, and freed by. Is it possible to embrace bodily freedom “sanctioned” only by abandoning our old terms of order?

“So let us be bad...”

If we’ve never yet seen our secret histories represented in language, then we are forced to create by invoking said history’s opposites—by miming the official story to create its paradox. If Divine is the Holy mother, what is born of her becomes the prodigal son, a thief:

Sartre writes:

*In The Thief’s Journal* the myth of the double has assumed its most reassuring, most common, most natural form. Here Genet speaks of Genet without intermediary... But Genet is never familiar, even with himself. He does, to be sure, tell us everything. The whole truth, nothing but the truth, but it is the sacred truth. He opens up one of his myths: he tells us:

“You’re going to see what stuff it’s made of,” and we find another myth.

He reassures us only to disturb us further. His autobiography is not an autobiography; it merely seems like one; it is a sacred cosmogony. (7)

Sartre continues that Genet speaks about his life “like an evangelist, as a wonderstruck witness” (8). I am interested in both Genet’s claiming and his witnessing of the word “thief” as a negotiation of his own doubleness: “thief” is what condemned him; “thief” was what gave him internal order, a subsequent pardoning, and also a way into writing his story. If we can reappropriate that which condemns us and turn it into lyric, perhaps it is possible to be freed from the sentence’s signification or its stigma...

In *The Thief’s Journal*, when Jean first meets Stilitano, the frustrating, “straight,” “master,” of this thief’s story, he is consumed by memory:

I was relieved. Destroyed. The emotion created within me a void which was at once filled by the memory of a nuptial scene. In a dance hall where soldiers were dancing among themselves, I watched their waltz. ...They haltingly exchanged their manly tenderness and wifely modesty....I know I was being mastered by Stilitano. (33-34)

When Jean meets Stilitano he feels “relieved” and destroyed,” but the emotion that surfaces creates a void, an absence. The flooding of the nuptial scene is an active memory that creates refuge in vacuity. This reappropriation of the feeling of a void is the confrontation of signification: if hollow, abyssal, unsayable, I’ll still sing my world: we are transported back to a dance hall filled with waltzing soldiers in uniform; it is a

memory of order on the brink of internal chaos. It is a mechanism for surviving trauma.

And indeed: is it any less a nuptial scene because the parties are male? Because the feeling is hidden? Because it is impermissible? Is this gentle memory any less gentle because it was triggered by the terror of being vulnerable to Stilitano? Is it possible that an internal refuge both protects us from the outside world while simultaneously propelling us into it?

Genet consistently threads a meta-reverie of deception through his prose: he claims that all he has been reduced to is a pretext (pretext as ruse, pretext as flesh before inscription). Cixous writes that “traumatism as the opening of the wound is the promise of the text” (xiv). Perhaps the repetitive puncturing of the internal abscess is just that: the wish to split apart wholly to invoke the promise of rehabilitation. The surfacing of this memory, particularly under a time of emotional decision (should I trust him...) points to Genet’s need to define his world in his own terms. Sartre writes:

When he was free, he roamed over Europe, convinced that events of his life had been planned by Providence, of which he was the sole concern.

Rejecting even the idea of chance, his mind acted upon his perception so that it could discern everywhere the signs of an external and providential order....And if he found it there, he did so because he had put it

there...Later, during his period of imprisonment, he again made use of

these patterns, but instead of using them to decipher, he transformed them into rules for building. (40)

Perhaps to brave a world after trauma we all need to articulate rules for building:

Genet makes contact with his traumatized past through the repetition of the telling of it; but the traumatic repetition compulsion, as Freud tells us, persistently propels us toward ruin. Our instincts propel us forward by virtue of recreating where we came from—and if we came from ruin? Can the act of survival purely be what Freud suggests by the death drive, that: This final goal of all organic striving can be stated too. It would be counter to the conservative nature of instinct if the goal of life were a state never hitherto reached. It must rather be an ancient starting point, which the living being left long ago, and to which it harks back again by all the circuitous paths of development. If we may assume as an experience admitting of no exception that everything living dies from causes within itself, and returns to the inorganic, we can only say ‘The goal of all life is death’, and, casting back, ‘The inanimate was there before the animate.’ (47)

Edmund White: *In five years, from 1942-1947, Genet wrote his five novels, an extraordinarily intense period of literary creation. Four of the five books fall into the category of ‘auto-fiction’, that hybrid of genres....A deep sadness, a feeling of leading almost a posthumous existence, always haunted Genet. When he was hard at work he*

*would cast it off but in the long periods of depression that intervened he descended into bleak self-hatred and more than once attempted suicide. Here, too, his powers of regeneration are startling. (xvi)*

What can we do to survive the worst if the very act of survival propels us toward what we have escaped? It is as Cixous writes: “To escape a predator, a lion, the deer runs faster than itself, it runs with a force greater than it has....It goes beyond its forces to survive. And it survives the predator, but it doesn’t survive the effort....It survives and dies from it” (60).

I wonder if there is refuge in doubleness. I wonder if one of the selves can be strong enough to survive the death instinct.

I understand now that at any given moment I am making decisions for three: there is a nine-year-old drug addict very much alive inside of me, for she was denied a voice so long. She wants to break things. She wants to yell. She has little to no possibility for what people call, “impulse control.” There is a second self that is conscious of the trauma, what I call the “present self” who strives to make decisions for her better interests, though those decision making skills do not feel organic to her. And then there’s this idea of a “future” self, who is not complete or whole, but who has the ability to look back and trust that the self who was in the world was not a phantom. To look back and find that self, I understand that we need a record of it.

Sartre writes that when Genet began stealing as a child each time was “a repetition of the crisis and the rite of passage, a death followed by resurrection. The child kills himself each time in order to come to life again as a thief; he now steals in order to be a thief” (69).

When I read Genet’s work I am startled not only by the body’s ability of regeneration, but at the life-giving possibility by the recording of it. In his first two novels Genet writes in and out and about duality but we are left—even if we practice duplicitous reading—with a concrete record. Sometimes it is impossible to find a place for all of the many fragmented parts of our self, but perhaps it is never impossible to create one. Genet’s work makes me believe that it is possible to reproduce a life-instinct through the possibility of human contact through language—even if we generate that language on the way to ruin. Sartre writes: “Perhaps the road to the heights and the road to the depths are one and the same” (50).

Because, in the end, I believe that what Genet tells you about his certain destruction is simply a pretext for his salvation.

Genet:

*Oh let me be only utter beauty!*

*I shall go quickly or slowly, but I shall dare what must be dared.*

*I shall destroy my appearances, the casings will burn away*



*and one evening I shall appear there in the palm of your hand,*

*quiet and pure,*

*like a glass statuette.*

*You will see me.*

*Round about me there will be nothing left (TJ, 207).*

De Profundis

*“Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis”*

Montclair  
July 2015

“...the repetition compulsion also revives experiences of the past that contain no potentiality of pleasure, and which could at no time have been satisfactions, even of impulses since repressed.”

Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

*I will begin by telling you that I blame myself terribly*<sup>4</sup> (981). Once I lived upstairs from a mysterious Irish woman who carried a blue guitar and smoked on our building's brick stoop. One night I could find no corkscrew and thought that if anyone would understand the gravity of the situation it would be the mysterious Irish woman with the blue guitar. When I walked downstairs I found her door open, so I let myself in. She walked in soon after, pack of cigarettes in hand, and asked me to account for myself. I did. "Sure, we can share *my* corkscrew," you said, "if we could share *your* wine." *But I met you either too late or too soon* (982)....*In your case, one had either to give up to you or to give you up* (981).

Once outside the Met you asked me to tell our story as you explained to me the future you imagined with your husband and I heard in your voice the fantasy of finality; I believe we have the sort of story that is made for repetition; but because you have positioned me as witness *remember also that whatever is misery to you to read, is still greater misery to me to set down* (981).

*I remember for instance* (981) when you asked me if I prefer when Joan Baez sings "Go No More A-Roving." I should have known then that there would be trouble. That morning we make our usual Sunday plans in the way we usually make them, "I'll be at a table near the window at the place near the corner for brunch." You tell me that with the Irish it is always what is unsaid that matters most. So, we suggest, rather than invite. Just as, at that point in our story, we look and never touch. *Of such actions, it is best to*

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<sup>4</sup> *The italics of the following chapter are taken from Oscar Wilde's De Profundis. (Complete Works of Oscar Wilde. London: Collins, 2003.)*

say what Virgil says to Dante of those whose lives have been barren in noble impulse and shallow of intention: *'Non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda, e passa'* (1010).

“You know your eyes are like a shark’s when you drink too much, dead?”

We order mimosas at brunch and later go to a poetry reading. We try to occupy space together while remaining apart. I don’t hear much poetry. *Between myself and the memory of joy lies a gulf no less deep than that between myself and joy in its actuality* (990-991).

After the reading we part at the bar, speak to others who give their Sundays to similar events, and then I see you look over a man’s shoulder and ask what number drink I am on; seven is my best guess. We are the last to leave and outside I stretch out under a cherry blossom tree and you keep whispering, “not here, not yet.” *Had our life together been as the world fancied it to be, one simply of pleasure, profligacy and laughter, I would not be able to recall a single passage in it* (991).

We walk to an Italian restaurant and you dignify our rather penniless adjunct existence by telling the waiter that we are professors, scholars, men of words and of deeds. And now you are telling me that the wedding band on your finger, the one that got there in a ceremony you had with your husband the year that I was born, does not mean what I think it means. *Of course, you had your illusions, lived in them indeed, and through their shifting mists and coloured veils saw all things changed. You thought, I remember quite well, that your devoting yourself to me, to the entire exclusion of your family and family life, was a proof of your wonderful appreciation of me, and your great affection* (997). You tell me that your ring is a dead symbol, a shadow. “I know,” I say, I understand, “but I will never be the one to start this.” And then you’re gone.

And then you're back and we're knocking plates off the table. *Now and then it is a joy to have one's table red with wine and roses, but you outstripped all taste and temperance* (983). And I'm ignoring your wedding band that is now sparkling with spilled wine. And I'm taking your hand to leave hoping one of us has paid the bill. *It is because it was full of moments and days...sinister in their warnings...that I can see or hear each separate incident in its detail, can indeed see or hear little else* (991).

We make it to a table outside and our actions have attracted a crowd of young men and I ask if they don't have trains to catch as we retreat into an alleyway of old scarred brick which scratches our backs; it is covered in ivy and the dust of crumbling commerce, a warm slant of light from above. *Of course I discern in all our relations, not Destiny merely, but Doom: Doom that walks always swiftly, because she goes to the shedding of blood* (995). We have fallen on our way and our legs drip with each other's blood—so does my mouth from kissing your wounds. Blessed and anointed willingness for this love to be, *it was not the first time I had been obliged to save you from yourself* (993).

I take you home and your roommate opens the door. I count on your roommate's narcissism to look past the blood and I am not mistaken. You slam the door in her face and pull me inside, but for me it is too late; once the incantation has been said out loud it loses all of its power. *Blindly I staggered as an ox into the shambles. I had made a gigantic psychological error* (985). I tell your roommate that we drank too much, that you fell, and ask for some help and bandages. Before your roommate helps me home I kiss your eyelids; you are passed out on the mattress you sleep on on the floor, a practice you adopted from me, which is a practice I picked up from residual junky habits. I

whisper, “like a shark’s” but now I begin to long for your animation and your contagious light to pull me with you to bottom. *I also had my illusions. I thought life was going to be a brilliant comedy, and that you were going to be one of many graceful figures in it* (998).

I don’t tell you then that I had cauterized myself from wanting the touch of another for years before I woke up with your blood on my mouth. You don’t tell me then that that was the first time you broke your marriage vows in twenty-five years. *The fact is that you were, and are I suppose still, a typical sentimentalist. For a sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it* (1049).

I come to see you later and by then you have reaffirmed your status as a married heterosexual woman and ruled that we’d simply been “infected by a bit of the Byronic imagination.” *...yet the memory of our ancient affection is often with me, and the thought that loathing, bitterness and contempt should for ever take that place in my heart once held by love is very sad to me...* (980).

But a couple of weeks before we had been drunk on a jetty. *The sea, as Euripides says in one of his plays about Iphigenia, washes away the stains and wounds of the world* (1056). And when I leaned back that day you were there to catch me; you said you hadn’t been so happy since you were a little girl, watching waves break or looking for dogfish from your father’s fishing boat. Between the dogfish the waves the way you could hold me on the edge and the scabs on our knees I thought we could call it straight if you needed to, but I vowed to do a better job of catching you next time. *You looked on it as a proof of almost quixotic chivalry* (1003).

We regress to suggestion rather than invitation. And then I get sick.

And learn that I would to have a hysterectomy—because of the treatments I will have to undergo, you and I will later experience menopause together. I had dinner plans one evening with a woman I looked to as a mother, but you say you'll be at the movie theater at 8 and I cancel my dinner plans; I have told you many times that I have never wanted another mother. I am in the back row when you get to the theater and you put your hand through a hole in my jeans and tell me that I look like Kurt Cobain; the only womb we talk of is your own. And so it will remain so, for this letter. *For secrets are always smaller than their manifestations* (1054).

I slowly convince myself that all we share is drunken abandon nothing more and I become detached. *The fatal errors of life are not due to man's being unreasonable: an unreasonable moment may be one's finest moment. They are due to man's being logical* (1000). You are leaving to spend some weeks with your husband and stop by my job to say goodbye. At the time I am bottlefeeding a kitten that was abandoned and I need to go home to tend to it. "Is this what you want?" you ask. And I tell you to have a good summer.

Disaster strikes. I stay up for the better part of the night cradling said kitten in my palm. Feeding it though it writhed and cried. Stroking its blue belly. In the morning I wake up and it is dead. You email and ask why I am being so distant. *Love is fed by the imagination, by which we become wiser than we know, better than we feel, nobler than we are: by which we can see Life as a whole: by which, and by which alone we can understand others in their real as in their ideal relations* (999). I tell you that the kitten died and you tell me that at least it had me to nurse it through the night and that that is exactly the way that you want to die.



*With very swift and running feet you passed from Romance to Realism* (980). I recognize now that the period that followed for me, while you were home in Ireland, was a kind of catatonic mourning punctuated with respites of Sapphic ideation; loving you from afar—and I did truly begin to love you then—meant that I loved you, perfected. *You must look back with wonder now to the days when you had my entire life in your hands. I too look back to them with wonder, and with other, far different, emotions* (1056). It was that summer that I entered into a relationship with twilight. Adding the longing I felt for you into my usual supply of gin and opiates created an all-consuming imaginative intensity. Nothing very much mattered to me except the equal dread and anticipation of your return.

While you were away I couldn't see past the confines of the present; *Suffering is one long moment. We cannot divide it by seasons. We can only record its moods, and chronicle their return. With us time itself does not progress. It revolves. It seems to circle round one centre of pain. The paralyzing immobility of a life, every circumstance of which is regulated after an unchangeable pattern...this immobile quality, that makes each dreadful day in the minutest detail like its brother, seems to communicate itself to those external forces the very essence of whose existence is ceaseless change....For us there is only one season, the season of Sorrow* (1009).

I don't remember when you come back or the exact date you tell me we can't talk anymore. *The thing that you personally have long ago forgotten, or can easily forget, is happening to me now, and will happen to me again to-morrow. Remember this, and you will be able to understand a little of why I am writing to you, and in this manner of writing* (1010). Months later I run into you at a coffee shop and ask if you will spend

Thanksgiving with me. You say no. ...*do you think that I would have allowed you to eat your heart away in darkness and solitude without trying in some way, however slight, to help you to bear the bitter burden of your disgrace?*(1015). I become more dependent on the solace and oblivion of twilight; you become still more perfect.

You perfected was a series of uns: unpredictable, unreliable, unparalleled. The day before Thanksgiving you ask me to meet you and tell me you've made us plans. You tell me that you'll be on the train at 8am. I meet you there and learn we are to spend the day walking dogs at an animal shelter in Brooklyn. Because you continually skewered my relationship to animals (one of love and gentleness and serenity and value and kindness and admittedly one that meant leaving the movie theater the second something bad happened to the dog) I realize the magnitude of the gesture. *The great things in life are what they seem to be, and for that reason, strange as that may sound to you, are often difficult to interpret* (1007).

When we get to the shelter I get down on my knees and a hound mix named Bob comes bounding towards me and puts his paws on my shoulders and licks my face. We take him to a Lou Reed tribute and walk over the Williamsburg Bridge. "Look at us," you say, "just a couple of lesbians who've nowhere to be, no family to accept us, spending their day with a couple of fellow strays." *It is not a thing for which one can render formal thanks in formal words. I store it in the treasury-house of my heart. I keep it there as a secret debt that I am glad to think I can never possibly repay. It is embalmed and kept sweet by the myrrh and cassia of many tears* (1011-1012). I take your hand. We pass an ascetic yogi who wears wreaths of prayer beads. We pass a runner adorned in ribbons and badges who is probably running still. And all the while Bob bounds into the afternoon

sun. ...under the influence of great emotion, which even you cannot have forgotten, I forgave the past; though I said nothing at all about the future (988).

And we laugh and catch up and make no mention of the alleyway, blood, hallucinogenic longing. *I had always thought that my giving up to you in small things meant nothing: that when a great moment arrived I could reassert my will-power....It was not so. At the great moment my will-power completely failed me. In life there is really no small or great thing* (985) Drunk in Alphabet City later I kiss you on an escalator and we cry when even later I cannot be reasoned with and get off of the train without you. *I am a born antinomian. I am one of those who are made for exceptions, not for laws. But while I see that there is nothing wrong in what one does, I see that there is something wrong in what one becomes. It is well to have learned that* (1019).

On the Williamsburg Bridge with Bob you had asked me if I knew Yeats' "Circus Animal's Desertion." I told you that I did and you asked if I could remember the last line about the "foul rag and bone shop of the heart." I told you that I could. "Yeah," you said, "that's your head." *Better than Wordsworth himself I know what Wordsworth meant when he said: Suffering is permanent, obscure, and dark/And has the nature of Infinity* (1018).

A few weeks later you ask if I will go to the Midwest with you to visit your uncle, a retired priest with a drinking problem who keeps getting himself into trouble in his community. I pick up our rental car and meet you at a diner and you are seething.

"You really were in rare form last night."

Last I remember, the night before I had pretended not to know you at an arrogant cocktail party and came to when the conductor pulled me off the train by my collar when I got to my stop—a habitual practice for you and me and me and the train conductor.

You tell me that that is a true enough memory, except that you had been afraid that I would miss my train home [the building we used to live in has burned and we are no longer neighbors] and asked a friend to drive us to the station. You tell me that when I asked you to wait with me you said no and I slammed a door in your face. Later you'll call this the most intimate moment we've ever shared. *I was trying to keep alive the very spirit and soul of Love, that it might dwell in my body through the long years of that body's humiliation...*(1009).

I knew the trip was off to a bad start when I hit a wrong button in the car and the playlist you made stopped working and got stuck on gospel hymns you listened to in your childhood.. I couldn't see then that the distance that separated you from your childhood was far greater than the distance that separated me from mine, and therefore you were that much closer to reclaiming it. *For you were at that time of life when all that one does is no more than the sowing of the seed, and I was at that time of life when all that one does is no less than the reaping of the harvest* (1054).

As we start to take in the familiar scenery, the stretches of creeks and trees at the Pennsylvania border, I am struck by all of its loveliness. "This looks far more beautiful with you than it did last time I saw it." You tell me that if you could find a man to talk to you that way you would leave your husband....*I, once a Lord of language...*(1010).

At a rest stop I remark that it seems to be hailing and that if it continues like that we might not make it to our hotel. You say something dismissive so I continue driving.

*The prospect of a battle in which you would be safe delighted you* (1001). But when I can no longer discern what is ice and what is instant death I pull over at a trucker's weigh station. We switch spots and you time how long it takes for the car to slide to a stop. We see a sign for Youngstown, Ohio and you make that our goal because you love the song Bruce Springsteen wrote about it. When we start talking about him we realize that we were at the same Bruce Springsteen concert in New Jersey in 2001. I was 13 years old then. You were 36. *I have not spared you* (1051).

I start calling hotels and find an amenable Motel 6. I also call what I gather is the only restaurant in town and beg them to stay open for us. We park our rental car and slide across a frozen parking lot into the foggy lights of the restaurant. I order what is tantamount to an IV drip of scotch. Our waitress comes by later and asks if she can clear anything away. You say, "Yes, take her. I don't know what to do with her." And our waitress says, "I would know exactly what to do with her." And you are furious that I suggest that I will go back to the motel with her. *If I were you, I would not care about being loved on false pretences* (1051). When it's time to go I talk the bartender into sending us home with a bottle of wine and you and I go outside and laugh. Months later you'll send me a picture of me outside of the restaurant: my hair is long, far past my waist, and I'm wearing an army jacket over a dashiki. *Our very dress makes us grotesques. We are the zanies of sorrow* (1040). And in the photo I am looking down, I know, so that the camera will not reveal to you how much I am in love with you.

*But do you think that you were worthy of the love I was showing you then, or that for a single moment I thought you were? Do you really think that at any period in our friendship you were worthy of the love I showed you, or that for a single moment I*

*thought you were? I knew you were not. But Love does not traffic in a marketplace, nor use a huckster's scales. Its joy, like the joy of the intellect, is to feel itself alive* (1005).

Back across the parking lot and we are in total awe. It is a revelation that our motel has a balcony. I ask you to climb to the top, ask you to let me be your Romeo. And you oblige. When you get to the top you shout sonnets down to me and they flow like daisy chains through the frosted snowflakes, through the electric blue light of the motel sign, through the part of my heart that has longed for you under cover of opiates, through the part of my heart that has told me that it could never be with you. *...having by curious persistence...succeeded in absorbing my entire life, could do no better with that life than break it in pieces. Strange as it may sound to you, it was but natural that you should do so* (1053). I have never loved you more than I do in that moment. For the way you drove us through the storm, for the anachronism of your voice in the precipice of the Midwest, for the marks of the alleyway that are seared still on my back. And as you spill Shakespeare's soliloquies over the balcony I am thinking of *Hamlet*. How you call him a daft narcissist. How he once made sense of my suicidal teenage angst. *He has the nature of the poet and he is asked to grapple with the common complexities of cause and effect, with life in its practical realization, of which he knows nothing, not with life in its ideal essence, of which he knows much* (1052). And then of that scene, that one moment where he realizes that all that we are and can ever be is bigger than all we can ever imagine for ourselves, and he realizes how terrifying that is:

...this most

excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave

o'erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted

with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to  
 me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.  
 What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason!  
 how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how  
 express and admirable! in action how like an angel!  
 in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the  
 world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me,  
 what is this quintessence of dust? man delights not  
 me: no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling  
 you seem to say so.

And so I tell you that I am certain that it was this—us—that Hamlet was talking about  
 when he recognized the immensity of the paragon of animals.

In the room *Casablanca* is the only thing coming through our TV and the fire  
 alarm is beeping and I start kissing your feet. But the man from the front desk comes to  
 stop the alarm so I jump on a chair and smash it and he puts us in the next room. And we  
 decide it would be ok just to sit close, just to hold each other, just don't touch. But now  
 we're kissing and I swear you are putting breath back into a body I'd considered to be  
 collapsed. And "my husband," you say. *You were my enemy: such an enemy as no man  
 ever had. I had given you my life....In less than three years you had entirely ruined me  
 from every point of view* (1005). And I tell you that I'm going to take a walk and when I  
 come back I'd like you to be in the spare bed and when I come back it's like a scene out  
 of *Titanic* and I offer to draw you like "one of my French girls" like you're on a faded  
 tapestry and not the orange flannel of the motel bedding, and I'm profoundly conscious

of what you have never experienced but cocksure enough to think that this will be the last time we ever talk about your husband in bed. *You can't treat all that you have brought upon me as a sentimental reminiscence to be served up occasionally with the cigarettes and liqueurs, a picturesque background to a modern life of pleasure like an old tapestry hung in a common inn* (1055).

In the morning I panic and leave but nowhere to run to in the frozen Midwest. *For my own sake there was nothing for me to do but to love you. I knew, if I allowed myself to hate you, that in the dry desert of existence over which I had to travel, and am travelling still, every rock would lose its shadow, every palm tree be withered, every well of water prove poisoned at its source. Are you beginning now to understand a little? Is your imagination wakening from the long lethargy in which it has lain? You know already what Hate is. Is it beginning to dawn on you what Love is, and what is the nature of love? It is not too late for you to learn...*(1005). I come back to the room and you've made no effort to conceal the havoc we've wreaked. You look at me in the gust of sunlight I let in from outside and say, "you know you're gonna have to marry me now."

Back on the road we are silent and I pray that we wait until we've returned the car before we devolve into regret. I pretend not to be surprised when you drop me off at the local library while you visit your uncle. *Of course I should have got rid of you, I should have shaken you out of my life as a man shakes from his raiment a thing that has stung him. In the most wonderful of all his plays Aeschylus tells us of the great Lord who brings up in his house the lion-cub...and loves it because it comes bright-eyed to his call and fawns on him for its food....And the thing grows up and shows the true nature of its race...and destroys the lord and his house and all that he possesses. I feel that I was such*



*a one as he. But my fault was, not that I did not part from you, but that I parted from you far too often* (986). Visions of the man who taught you to love poetry, which is what taught you to love me, really, are suspended as I recognize that your uncle meeting a woman you drove across the country with could reveal a secret you've suppressed from yourself for all the long years of your marriage. I try to take a walk but it is frozen so I go to the school café. I have no money and a copy of the Dalai Lama's book that I try to make sense of for the next eight hours but I have no success. *Your pale face used to flush easily with wine or pleasure. If, as you read what is here written, it from time to time becomes scorched, as though by a furnace-blast, with shame, it will be all the better for you. The supreme vice is shallowness. Whatever is realised is right* (1002). When you pick me up you tell me that I ruined your trip. We get snowed in in Toledo on the drive home and I think we're looking at Lake Erie when I ask you if in ten years we'll look back and wonder what we were up to or will we still be on the road? *The head of Medusa that turns living men to stone, you have been allowed to look at in a mirror merely* (981). In the morning we try to drive but only get as far as Pennsylvania. We leave a hotel that won't serve us alcohol and get thrown out of the local chain restaurant when I ask for a fourth glass of scotch. *I was made for other things* (984). You scorn me in the morning when I say that I'm afraid of the ice on the road. I am sad that I neither have your resiliency for enduring weather patterns or your sympathy. *It all flashed across me, and I remember that, for the first and last time in my entire prison-life, I laughed* (1006).

We get to the university I work at; we have just driven eight hours and I am five minutes late to teach. You drop me off in a filthy rental car and I show up unshowered and haggard and explain to students that I hit some traffic on the way. Next time I see

you I'm trying to pull my suitcase off of a bus and I feel someone help and look up and find you. *There is nothing that stirs in the whole world of thought or motion to which Sorrow does not vibrate in terrible if exquisite pulsation* (1011). Some months before I took you to the town where I live now and you were convinced that we went through a rabbit hole to get there because it was so beautiful; it was not my home yet. You told me stories of your childhood, your ginger hair, your alcoholic mother, your longing to be accepted by your father. We agreed that we'd go to Spain, where we could be gay without censorship. This was your idea. ...*if you want an inscription to read at dawn and at night-time and for pleasure or for pain, write up on the wall of your house in letters for the sun to gild and the moon to silver 'Whatever happens to another happens to oneself,' and should anyone ask you what such an inscription can possibly mean you can answer that it means 'Lord Christ's heart and Shakespeare's brain'* (1027). I told you that I didn't believe that I could be geographically gay—the thing was, wherever we were, I kept waking up in love with you.

*I felt that at last the time had come when you should be made to see, to recognise, to realise a little of what you had done...*(1013). The last time you were in Spain you went to identify your mother's body. Her young lover called you in the middle of the night to tell you that she'd overdosed and then he left her. When you got to the morgue no one had a common language. The worker kept opening and closing drawers and with each corpse that wasn't hers you felt hope. Until they opened the last drawer....*if the worlds have indeed, as I have said, been built out of Sorrow, it has been by the hands of Love, because in no other way could the Soul of man for whom the worlds are made reach the full stature of its perfection. Pleasure for the beautiful body, but Pain for the*

*beautiful Soul* (1025). Did we choose Spain to reclaim it? Or because of the nights I held you—blind drunk—and whispered to you that you were not your mother? Or was it because of what we left unspoken, our hope eclipsed by fear of succumbing to the oblivion we flirted with?

And eventually I travel to meet your family. The first night of my visit I drink too much and you drop me off with your husband and I cannot look him in the eye when he asks if I am the one who causes all the trouble. *It was like feasting with panthers. The danger was half the excitement. I used to feel as the snake-charmer must feel when he lures the cobra to stir from the painted cloth or reed-basket that holds it, and makes it spread its hood at his bidding...* (1042). The next night I can't keep my hands off of you and I begin to think that this cannot be something that I can survive. *I know too well why Baudelaire cried to God: O Seigneur, donnez-moi la force et le courage/De contempler mon corps et mon Coeur sans degout* (1031). I take off to Paris in fear and we arrange to meet in Dublin in a week's time. *And I remember that afternoon, as I was in the railway-carriage whirling up to Paris, thinking what an impossible, terrible, utterly wrong state my life had got into* (988)...I wake up under a bridge and with the last glimmer of phone battery I see a message from you that says, "Wherever you are, get home safe." And by now I speak Irish well enough to know that that actually translates to, "fuck you bitch die."

*And the end of it all is that I have got to forgive you* (1017).

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In the 1927 edition of Wilde's *De Profundis*—a letter Wilde wrote to his young lover Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas from prison—Wilde's longtime friend Robert Ross

writes that in some passages of this letter written *incarcere et vinculis* Wilde “has allowed his personal animosity and disappointment to deform the facts: he poses as a sort of lord of life brought to ruin through the imperious will and almost insane temper of a youth half his age.” Ross also cautions readers not to “look...for a fair and sympathetic portrait of Lord Alfred Douglas; before we read a word we expect that the portrait will be blocked in with deep shadows, and the lights used sparingly, if at all.” The story of Wilde and Bosie is now an alternative classic of notoriety: the insatiable courtship between them was catapulted by Wilde’s fame and dogged by Bosie’s father, the Marquess of Queensbury. One day Queensbury leaves a card at the club, “To Oscar Wilde—posing somdomite.” Bosie desperately wanted to bring his father to ruin, even though he knew full well that it could tear down Wilde too; yet Bosie insisted that Wilde file a lawsuit against his father. So they accuse Queensbury of libel—but the hitch with a libel accusation is that it can only be called libel if it is untrue. Wilde’s courtroom case became a spectacle; the prosecuting attorney was an old college rival and Wilde was found to be quite guilty of “crimes of gross indecency” (“sodomomy (?)”) and a very harsh judge sentenced him to two years imprisonment—the harshest sentence he could receive for that crime. Wilde’s plays were subsequently pulled off of the stage. He was not allowed any information about his children. He was bankrupted—both from years of Bosie’s ludicrous material needs for decadence and also the courtroom charges. His prized library books were sold at auction. In *De Profundis* Wilde asks Bosie, “Do you recognise now that when I described it as an Atrophy destructive of everything but itself, I was scientifically describing a real psychological fact? That all my charming things were to be sold...was absolutely nothing to you....What you really saw in it was the

possibility that your father might ultimately lose a few hundred pounds, and that paltry consideration filled you with ecstatic joy” (1003). Wilde was not allowed to leave prison for his mother’s funeral. Not, at first, allowed any writing material in prison either. And all the while Bosie remained free.

When *De Profundis* was published for the Modern Library in 1927, twenty-seven years after Wilde’s death, all passages that were too much directed towards Bosie and Bosie’s temper were omitted; Ross, who was in charge of Wilde’s literary estate, chose to “extract such portions of the work as might be considered of general public interest” (Prefatory Dedication, 1927). Happily, the standards of general interest seem to have shifted and the unabridged *De Profundis* was published for the first time in 1962. Right from the beginning of the letter Wilde does not shy away from addressing Bosie, from acknowledging a resounding and throbbing pain: “I have no doubt that in this letter in which I have to write of your life and of mine, of the past and of the future, of sweet things changed to bitterness and of bitter things that may be turned into joy, there will be much that will wound your vanity to the quick. If it prove so, read the letter over and over again till it kills your vanity....It is the only thing that can save you” (980). *De Profundis* is filled with the bravery many of us wish we could exert when confronting love that has brought us to ruin: “The gods are strange. It is not of our vices only they make instruments to scourge us. They bring us to ruin through what in us is good, gentle, humane, loving. But for my pity and affection for you and yours, I would not now be weeping in this terrible place” (995), though to execute such confrontations quite so lyrically is well beyond any ordinary powers. While Wilde’s remorse in *De Profundis* is clear, so is his acceptance of Bosie’s true nature, one which he was formerly charmed by:

“Ah! You had no motives in life. You had appetites merely” (980). Wilde’s desire for a new, calmer life with friends he can rely on is clear: “Of course I know that to ask for alms on the highway is not to be my lot, and that if ever I lie in the cool grass at night-time it will be to write sonnets to the Moon. When I go out of prison, Robbie will be waiting for me...” (1019). His description of Christ and his desire to write about him is eloquently impassioned: “Christ, had he been asked, would have said—I feel quite certain about it—that the moment the prodigal son fell on his knees and wept he really made his having wasted his substance with harlots, and then kept swine and hungered for the husks they ate, beautiful and holy incidents in his life” (1037). Indeed, *De Profundis* has all of the qualities not of reformation, but of re-creation—an indomitable thirst to live again with new awareness found in the depths. It is quite easy to miss, however, that, at bottom, *De Profundis* is equally a request for a reunion with Bosie: “At the end of a month, when the June roses are in all their wanton opulence, I will, if I feel able, arrange through Robbie to meet you in some quiet foreign town like Bruges, whose grey houses and green canals and cool still ways had a charm for me, years ago. For the moment you will have to change your name. The little title of which you were so vain—and indeed it made your name sound like the name of a flower—you will have to surrender, if you wish to see me; just as my name, once so musical in the mouth of Fame, will have to be abandoned by me, in turn. How narrow, and mean and inadequate to its burdens is this century of ours!...I hope that our meeting will be what a meeting between you and me should be, after everything that has occurred” (1058).

Wilde would later write in “The Ballad of Reading Gaol”: “For each man kills the thing he loves/Yet each man does not die”—he died within two years of writing those

words, about a year and a half after his solicited reunion with Bosie came true. Wilde was aware that going back to Bosie would be an insane psychological imposition on himself and those who were trying to help him in his life after prison; Wilde's wife Constance said she would not allow him his yearly income if he lived with Bosie again. Yet, in August of 1898, not long after Wilde was released from Reading, Bosie and Wilde:

met at Rouen, almost certainly on 28 August. Wilde wept at the station, they held hands, they walked arm in arm....They stayed overnight in Rouen and parted on the most affectionate terms. Douglas sent a loving telegram to Wilde, and Wilde replied in a way that contradicted most of *De Profundis*: 'I feel that my only hope of again doing beautiful work in art is being with you. It was not so in the old days, but now it is different, and you can really recreate in me that energy and sense of joyous power on which art depends. Everyone is furious with me for going back to you, but they don't understand us. I feel that it is only with you that I can do anything at all. Do remake my ruined life for me, and then our friendship and love will have a different meaning to the world.'" (Ellman 546-547)

But it was not to be any different than it was before. Because of that painful wish for the remaking of ruin, I would like to pose that *De Profundis* is neither love letter nor indictment nor social criticism, though it may have traces and reverberations into each of those categories. *De Profundis* is rather a performative exploration of trauma: how else could someone so wise write so methodically and so lyrically about going back to the very person who hurt him so deeply?

Caruth writes, “In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). In other words, the compelling need to reunite with the one who brought you ruin—after two years imprisonment—without foreseeing additional ruin is an attempt at a hallucinatory reparation of the initial tragedy. We need hardly look very far to understand Wilde’s trial—let alone the subsequent banishment from the society he once dominated, bankruptcy, and exile—as a trauma, even though he appears to have never lost his cool while on the stand:

Carson: Do you think an ordinarily constituted being would address such expressions to a younger man?

Wilde: I am not happily, I should think, an ordinarily constituted being.  
(Trials 237).

When Wilde was imprisoned he was emaciated, haggard, and often despondent:

“Reynolds’s News noted that Wilde’s health had been seriously affected since his confinement, and that he would probably be transferred to the infirmary. ‘Already Wilde has grown much thinner, and since his conviction he has preserved, it is said, a settled melancholy and reticence. He has had great difficulty in getting sleep, and from time to time he loudly bemoans the bitterness of his fate.’ There was no refuge in oblivion, only pain” (Ellman 480). This is quite a different image than the young Wilde, a dandy who was satirized by Gilbert and Sullivan. Or the Wilde of the often-imitated green carnation.

But we cannot process the severity of a trauma while we are living in it. Wilde’s need to see Bosie again—the need to remake the ruin—is a need to recreate the trauma in



an attempt to process and understand it under new circumstances. Sadly, the traumatic compulsion for re-creation often results in a retraumatization. Ellman writes that after Wilde and Bosie reunited: “As he yielded to the entreaties of Bosie to live with him, entreaties which echoed his own inclinations, Wilde could feel that the return was a coup de theatre not calculated to propitiate the unseen directors who allot tragic parts. The fall in 1895 was spectacular; a second fall was of lesser importance. But the second fall confirmed the pattern of his destiny” (548).

We should not wonder what Wilde expected from a meeting with Bosie. Rather, we should consider that the need for a reunion was transcendent of conscious desire and more so a part of what Freud calls the “traumatic neurosis.”

Caruth writes that in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud was:

Perplexed by the terrifyingly literal nightmares of battlefield survivors and the repetitive reenactments of people who have experienced painful events, Freud wonders at the peculiar and sometimes uncanny way in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them.... “The most moving poetic picture of a fate such as this,” Freud writes, “can be found in the story told by Tasso in his romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*”:

Its hero Tancred unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armor of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders’ army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he wounded his beloved once again.” (Caruth 2)

Yet each man kills the thing he loves. How can we be expected to seek outside the reach of trauma when our mind is destined to continue to explore its parameters for sense and reason; in many ways, we never again make it out of the battlefield. The quest for reason is also endless, as there will never be an answer as to why we love uncontrollably, or how we are drawn to danger, compelled to “feast with panthers,” unabashedly love the wrong person, or willingly bring ourselves to ruin again and again as a testament to the longevity of a doomed love. And after all, how can we not be expected to hope that just this one time, it might be different?

After their reunion, Bosie and Wilde took a villa together in Naples, but financial troubles followed them. Wilde’s wife Constance would no longer provide his agreed allowance if he continued to live with Bosie. Bosie’s mother cut him off and “his promise to remain with Wilde for the rest of their lives had held him only until Wilde himself agreed that Douglas might as well go” (554). Wilde wrote to Ross:

The facts of Naples are very bald and brief. Bosie, for four months, by endless letters, offered me a ‘home.’ He offered me love, affection, and care, and promised that I should never want for anything. After four months I accepted his offer, but when we met at Aix on our way to Naples I found that he had no money, no plans, and had forgotten all his promises. His one idea was that I should raise money for us both. I did so, to the extent of \$120. On this Bosie lived, quite happy. When it came to his having, of course, to repay his own share, he became terrible, unkind, mean, and penurious, except where his own pleasures were concerned, and when my allowance ceased, he left...It is, of course, the most bitter

experience of a bitter life;...it is better that I should never see him again. I don't want to. He fills me with horror.” (Ellman 555)

It is because we cannot understand the severity of the moment while we are under it that it comes back later to teach us, again and again, what it means to lose something of which we only had an elusive hold of to begin with. In her own performative testimony of trauma Cixous writes:

Nonetheless god knows we have rivers of tears to shed. Where have they then gone? They will return later, indirect, displaced. For the friend we will weep the tears that were first extracted before the body of the beloved. The great griefs come to us disguised, long after, as ghosts, when we believe them far removed, it is then they come, slip, unrecognizable, anguishing, incomprehensible forms, chained into vertigo, into chest pains. (*Stigmata* 93)

Wilde was aware of the cyclical repetition of tragedy from the Greek dramas he so treasured; “he had made Douglas the Helen of his tragedy, but he had also a sense of doom, early and late” (Ellman 548). “‘I daresay that what I have done is fatal,’ he tells Robert Ross, who alone had read the whole of *De Profundis*, ‘but it had to be done.’ ‘I love him as I always did, with a sense of tragedy and ruin.’ ‘My life cannot be patched up. There is a doom on it.’ ‘It is the result of the nemesis of character and the bitterness of life. I was a problem for which there was no solution.’ ‘My going back to Bosie was psychologically inevitable...’” “Blame fell,” writes Ellman, “equally on the gods, the psyche, and the world, working towards a prearranged conclusion” (549).

Contemporary theories of trauma corroborate just that psychological inevitability of which Wilde writes about. Incidentally, establishing a narrative to the trauma—such as a letter, a written testimony to the one who has harmed you—is exactly what is most commonly prescribed as perhaps the only cure to stop the trauma’s persistent repetition:

To undo this entrapment in a fate that cannot be known, cannot be told, but can only be repeated, a therapeutic process—a process of constructing a narrative, or reconstructing a history and essentially, of re-externalizing the event—has to be set in motion. This re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and transmit the story, literally transfer it to another outside one self and then take it back again, inside. Telling thus entails a reassertion of the hegemony of reality and a re-externalization of the evil that affected and contaminated the trauma victim. (Felman 69)

And what was Wilde’s reality in exile? It was one of poverty shame and abandonment. Passionate love resurfaced. And hope not realized. Ellman writes, “the dramatis personae of his earlier life returned as phantoms of his later life, some pretending not to see him, making him feel like he was the phantom from whom they fled. He was reliving his life as if it had all been a failure” (557). *De Profundis* is a testimony not only to what transpired prior to Wilde’s fall, but also to the inevitability of falling again. Felman writes:

What makes the newness and radicality of the poetic—and the psychoanalytical—performance of a testimony which is both ‘surprising’ and momentous is...not just the inescapability of the vocation of the

witness insofar as the accident pursues him, but the witness's readiness, precisely, to pursue the accident (24).

Did Wilde suspect that it was death in exile in Paris that awaited him? I don't imagine so, though the inscription on his tomb: "For his mourners will be outcast men,/And outcasts always mourn," taken from his post-prison "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" suggests an act of almost prestidigitatious tragic intuition.

If we consider *De Profundis* as a narrative of trauma we can look into the shadows that Ross cautioned us against and in them see Wilde's need to name the unsayable; to give an authentic, unfictionalized representation of consequences of "the love that dare not speak its name." In fact, Freud looked to literature to understand the traumatic compulsion of repetition because literature "is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is at the specific point at which knowing and now knowing intersect that the language of literature and psychoanalytic experience precisely meet" (Caruth 3).

The inevitability of Wilde's second fall was not, I think, entirely devoid of the possibility of the re-creation of a second self, a post-fall self that, having both predicted and seen the worst, no longer has any anxiety of its coming. How we regain the ability to brave the world again after it has crumbled is ultimately through a hopeful possibility of newness, even as our minds and bodies rush towards a need to reinvoke the tragedy that created this potential new being. If we rush towards those who have hurt us in the past, it is only with the hope of a neo-synthesized creation of new feeling. As Judith Butler writes,

For if I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the “we” except by finding the way in which I am tied to “you,” by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know.

*(Precarious Life 49)*

I think that when you are willing to go to ruin for a love that you are certain many members of the world discourage, denigrate, and frankly deem impermissible, you invoke something rather primal that perhaps does still reside within each of us. Even whatever is repressed cannot be evaporated from the strange chambers of the heart. Freud says, “The repressed instinct never ceases to strive after its complete satisfaction which would consist in the repetition of a primary experience of satisfaction: all substitution—or reaction formations and sublimations avail nothing .... in the poet’s words [it] ‘urges ever forward, ever unsubdued’ (Mephisto in ‘Faust’ Act 1. Faust’s Study.)” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 52-5).

...all substitution will never do

...sublimations avail nothing

...we never cease to strive after complete satisfaction

For our own survival then, forgiveness must be the only course...

When we return to the ones we love without reason there is some animal instinct that is driven by a kind of feeling that makes your teeth itch, that sets in motion an urging forward that is transcendent of ruin, exile, emaciation, and even defeat. Cixous writes:

One day, I don't know when, it was decided to call love a set of strange, indescribable physical phenomena, is it pain? —but from the moment that the name is given to that burning in one's breast, the violence of the strangeness is interrupted and the ancient horror, hidden behind the new word, begins to be forgotten. Let's go back to before language...let's go back to that disturbing age, the age of myths and of folktales, the age of stone, of fire, of knives. Before language there is the fire that bites but doesn't kill, the evil that, like all pain, separates us, the dehiscence that opens in us closed organs, making us seem strange to ourselves.... (112-113)

Maybe all that we can ever be expected to do is to cultivate that strangeness we feel into a common language, a testimony of sorts that can survive the repetition compulsion. Some sort of document to suggest when and where we felt and were compelled to feel what we were and are. Van der Kolk and Van Der Hart write, "Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language. It appears that, in order for this to occur successfully, the traumatized person has to return to the memory often in order to complete it" (qtd in Caruth 176).

We remember in order to survive.

Felman writes that the only certitudes [trauma] victims had in common were love, exile, and suffering (3-4). And in many ways, Wilde understood that love and her tragedies were prefigured for him all along:

I don't regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure. I did it to the full, as one should do everything that one does to the full. There was no pleasure I did not experience. I threw the pearl of my soul into a cup of wine. I went down the primrose path to the sound of flutes. I lived on honeycomb. But...The other half of the garden had its secrets for me also. Of course all this is foreshadowed and prefigured in my art. (1026)

Wilde says this prefiguration runs like a chord through his only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Perhaps it does so most notably in this proclamation of the epigrammatic Lord Henry Wootton:

“Romance lives by repetition, and repetition converts an appetite into art. Besides, each time that one loves is the only time one has ever loved. Difference of object does not alter singleness of passion. It merely intensifies it. We can have in life but one great experience at best, and the secret of life is to reproduce that experience as often as possible.’

“Even when one has been wounded by it...?”

“Especially when one has been wounded by it...” (193).

I wonder: if we participate in what we understand to be the inevitable do we not accept a tinge of what Maggie Nelson terms “prophylactic anxiety?” If the worst is coming, we’ll be damned sure it doesn’t surprise us. I wonder still if that doesn’t leave room for what Stanley Kunitz calls the “joy of surviving/on the edge of the road” (“An Old Cracked Tune”)

Is it possible to flourish, to forgive, even, in the wake of the promise of disintegration?



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*I can, at any rate, merely proceed on the lines of my own development, and by accepting all that has happened to me make myself worthy of it* (1041). I don't physically die in Paris but I have resigned any hope or goal or future for self or others. *Where you will receive this letter, if indeed it ever reaches you, I don't know. Rome, Naples, Paris, Venice, some beautiful city on sea or river, I have no doubt, holds you* (1002). Months later we are sitting in a borrowed white Cadillac crying. You say you drove to Dublin to find me but couldn't bear it. I just hang down my head. You say you wanted to teach me what being alone really meant, show me what it means to be in exile. I am unfortunately still in love with you. Even more so since you've taken such pains to teach me.

*Clergymen, and people who use phrases without wisdom, sometimes talk of suffering as mystery. It is really a revelation* (1024). The next night we are stumbling down a crowded MacDougal Street and I grab your wrists in front of a graffitied Jimi Hendrix; I have just agreed to respect your marriage vows and be your friend. You tell me that you won't always know how to control yourself around me. *There is no use telling a person a thing that they don't feel and can't understand* (1002). I tell you that it will never matter what we call it. *To reject one's own experiences is to arrest one's own development. To deny one's own experiences is to put a lie into the lips of one's own life. It is no less a denial of the Soul* (1020).

You leave for the summer. Our third year of this pattern. And I retreat back into an opiate haze of longing. My fifteenth year of that pattern. *Where there is sorrow there is Holy Ground* (1011). I've lost my home, my car, my dog, and I cannot decide if I have lost you because I cannot decide if I ever really had you to begin with. *But while there*

*were times when I rejoiced in the idea that my sufferings were to be endless, I could not bear them to be without meaning* (1018). I wake up in places I wish I did not wake up in next to people I wish I did not know. And then I get sober. *At every single moment of one's life one is what one is going to be no less than what one has been. Art is a symbol, because man is a symbol* (1026).

You remain entirely silent....*you knew, and admitted to others you knew, how you made me suffer, and how I realised it. I waited month after month to hear from you* (1058). In the end I write to you. *...what one has done in the secret chamber one has some day to cry aloud on the housetops* (1018). We have plans for the fall but when the fog was swept from my brow I began to see things as they were and not as I wished them to be *for like many or all of those who have placed their Heaven in this earth, I have found in it not merely the beauty of Heaven, but the horror of Hell also* (1019)... You write to tell me that when I am ready to drink you will be here for me. *Remember how and why I am here, at this very moment* (1009). You beg me to let you be my fool. *How often have those words come back to me in the wretched solitary cell of the various prisons I have been sent to. I have said them to myself over and over again, and seen in them, I hope unjustly, some of the secret of your strange silence* (994). I use the words of others to respond to you to tell you that I cannot see you because I cannot understand what a world without you could mean for me. *You had better come down into the dust and learn it beside me* (1018). Months later I go to a working space we used to share and there's a stack of my things—everything I've ever given you gathered into a pile on what would have been my desk. *But somehow, in spite of everything, you have not really escaped....And yet you know you have not escaped....In your own eyes, and some day you*

*will have to think of your conduct, you are not, cannot be quite satisfied at the way in which things have turned out....A brazen face is a capital thing to show the world, but now and then when you are alone, and have no audience, you have, I suppose, to take the mask off for mere breathing purposes (1047).*

A year goes by and I see you at an event. Your whole family is with you. *That was my first news of you. It displeased me (1006).* I shake your husband's hand as you pretend to bump into the young woman I am with who you assume is my girlfriend. And I wonder: on just how many continents have your lips changed the course of my history? And I realize then that no matter what we call it we may never really be able to call it over. *Every single work of art is the fulfilment of a prophecy....Every single human being should be the fulfilment of a prophecy (1032).* And as I look at you I remember one day, not long after we'd reconciled after Paris, after you were convinced that I understood exile, we went to a garden in Harlem and I walked ahead of you because in my head I was adding "Harlem" to our map of geographic gayness. *But to recognise that the soul of a man is unknowable is the ultimate achievement of Wisdom. The final mystery is oneself. When one has weighed the sun in a balance, and measured the steps of the moon, and mapped out the seven heavens star by star, there still remains oneself (1038).*

Exasperated, I turned around to find you and you were bending down to talk to a bed of tulips that weren't doing well. And you encouraged them. And my last ounce of patience vanished as I realized then that because you are a woman who talks to tulips I will never not be in love with you.

And all of these moons later, here we are at this public event and you tell me you would never have dreamed of seeing me again. *You think one can have one's emotions*

*for nothing. One cannot. Even the finest and the most self-sacrificing emotions have to be paid for. Strangely enough, that's what makes them fine* (1049). We hug but I quickly try to push you away. And everyone watches to see what we will do next—how could they have known what transpired between us; we can hardly be expected to understand that ourselves. *You were the only person who, and without in any way exposing yourself to scorn or danger or blame, could have given another colour to the whole affair: have put the matter in a different light: have shown to a certain degree how things really stood* (1008). Instead you whisper and ask me to kiss you. *You came to me to learn the Pleasure of Life and the Pleasure of Art. Perhaps I am chosen to teach you something much more wonderful, the meaning of Sorrow, and its beauty* (1059). And I think that my mind says no and my lips say no and my body says no and my conscience says no but something still says yes; with you, something will always say yes. And I can see then, as you are back in my arms, that you've retained the mystery of the blue guitar, just as if you had hit *restart*; "A tune beyond us, yet ourselves..."

*Terrible as what you did to me was, what I did to myself was far more terrible still* (1017)....*Reason does not help me* (1020)....*the silence, the solitude, the shame—each and all of these things I have to transform into a spiritual experience. There is not a single degradation of the body which I must not try and make into a spiritualizing of the soul* (1020)....*The important thing, the thing that lies before me, the thing that I have to do, or be for the brief remainder of my days one maimed and marred, and incomplete, is to absorb into my nature all that has been done to me, to make it part of me, to accept it without complaint, fear, or reluctance. The supreme vice is shallowness. Whatever is realised is right* (1020)....*And if then I am not ashamed of my punishment, as I hope not*

*to be, I shall be able to think, and walk, and live with freedom (1021)....Then I must learn to be happy. Once I knew it, or thought I knew it, by instinct (1022)....*

*I need not tell you that to me Reformations in Morals are as meaningless and vulgar as Reformations in Theology. But while to propose to be a better man is a piece of unscientific cant, to have become a deeper man is the privilege of those who have suffered. And such I think I have become. You can judge for yourself.*

*For yourself, I have but this last thing to say. Do not be afraid of the past. If people tell you that it is irrevocable, do not believe them. The past, the present and the future are but one moment in the sight of God, in whose sight we should try to live. Time and space, succession and extension, are merely accidental conditions of Thought. The Imagination can transcend them, and move in a free sphere of ideal existences.*

*What lies before me is my past. I have got to make myself look on that with different eyes, to make the world look on it with different eyes, to make God look on it with different eyes. This I cannot do by ignoring it, or slighting it, or praising it, or denying it. It is only to be done fully by accepting it as an inevitable part of the evolution of my life and character: by bowing my head to everything that I have suffered....And incomplete, imperfect, as I am, yet from me you may have still much to gain (1059).*

*Remember also that I have yet to know you. Perhaps we have yet to know each other. Your affectionate friend (1059).*

Pseudo France

The answer will perhaps be forthcoming that the departure must be played as the necessary prelude to the joyful return, and that in this latter lay the true purpose of the game.

Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

(1)

Last night I drove a rental car to Adelphi University to see Paul Taylor's second company perform three dances. Security was tightened in New York City so the drive took about two hours. It seemed popular radio repeated the same six songs. The show—each dance was about a half hour—ended around 10, and after getting a local meal I drove home and had a fight with my husband.

That may be what happened but that may not be what is right. I do not wish to share anything false with you, but what, may I ask, does it mean to represent something wholly? *It will all be the same, only I will be stiller*<sup>5</sup> (4). And what is it, really, that we marginalize within ourselves which prohibits a story from becoming cohesive after we verbalize it? It's just that as I've aged I've become a sort of sommelier of fragmentation. And it makes me wonder if I could tell you about what happened that night I drove to Long Island without compromising either of us. To do so truly I imagine you and I would have to create some language about what it means to understand something "sufficiently" and what it means to be "grasping" for information. Consequently, we'd have to be quite frank with each other about when we like—or even prefer—to be grasping. I want very much to tell you what happened that night I drove to Long Island, but I'm not sure how far we can get without constructing mutual parameters of truth and memory and trust.

If you are still there I always knew you wouldn't stop me from trying.

The first dance I watched the night I drove to Long Island was called "Cascade" and it taught me some feeling that had hitherto been intangible to me; as you know, dance can have a very real way of verbalizing impact. Perhaps it was a predilection for baroque

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<sup>5</sup> *The italics in the following chapter are taken from James Baldwin's Giovanni's Room.*



costuming that allowed me access into such vulnerability. Or perhaps it was the waves of motion moored to such a delicate symphony.

The second company is made up of six dancers—three men and three women. The dance began with extraordinary movements indicative of the depth of bodily connection possible in a partnership; I'd even say that the dancers were gloating. Watching how each man supported each woman as she risked leaping. Or how unspoken the men took cues to kneel. Or how comfortably the women could let themselves be led reminded me of the simplicity of human patterns—body to body, dance to dance.

I began working as an adjunct professor of English when I was twenty-three years old. I was an actively opiate addicted alcoholic who got into an affair to distract myself from being in love with the wrong woman. I hadn't yet fallen in love with the affair. At the time, I thought it must be the goal of my job to point students to patterns of human behaviors present in the texts I assigned. I used a mantra taken from Willa Cather's second novel *O! Pioneers*: that there are only two or three human stories and they continue repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before. I wonder now how my story list must have changed since then. It's possible it went from:

- 1) multiplicity of the self
- 2) oblivion
- 3) skirting the precipice

to:

- 1) Fragmentation
- 2) Seeing possibility after loss

### 3) Skirting the precipice.

On any given day I suppose the master story list should read something like love and loss, grief and redemption, family and isolation—or is that six? Is it fair to systematize our negations as essential pieces of our internal make-up? In active addiction, as we say when we're clean, I had the gift of an unabashed suspension of nerves. My students witnessed something unflinching that has been a challenge to reclaim without the haze of opiates. Yet, I was also brutally unreliable—I was the first they came to to discuss strife, riddles, and victories—and the last to return their papers.

Sobriety does not cure unreliability. But perhaps it can alter patterns—particularly the ones we'd considered “instinctual.” Because, after all, patterns change though the story repeats. I think internalizing the compass of your pattern-making has something to do with understanding what you are moored to, even in exile. Even and especially when the exile is internal.

*Not all my memorizing had prepared me for the metamorphosis which my memorizing had helped to bring about (75-76).*

And then, just like that, the partners changed in “Cascade.” The men bowed before different women as the women threw themselves into different arms. Are we held by the sinewy tissue of the muscles of those arms or by the gossamer memory being held evokes? Have I used “we” to throw you off my track? Keep you from asking me why it takes extremity to permit embrace? The risk was intact—the dancers leapt and were caught and leapt again. The motions were identical. But the tension became palpable. And I thought then that you could do the exact right motion (and we do, don't we? we've

some strange ideas about perfection) but if you do the right motion with the wrong partner the dance will never be the same. In a feeling's unreasonable refusal to be contained by the pattern we are granted a glimpse inside what has refused to be shattered. *I do not know how I knew this, but I knew it at once; perhaps I knew it because I wanted to live* (87).

But where can I begin to tell you about the night I drove to Long Island to watch a dance? I'm inclined to believe this night is rather indicative of certain patterns of my life as I understand it. If indeed what I believe—that after we are exiled we become ledger books of motions ventured, motions regained, and motions lost—is true.

Let's try starting here, now—before the dance even. Like Gawain, I promise I won't knowingly tell you a single untruth.

*I should think that even if you returned here in some awful sorrow, you might—well, you might find it possible here to begin to be reconciled* (120). I believe that some of the most important moments of my life have happened in rental cars.

But to start there would be to tell you nothing of the psychedelic tantric posters a local and unlikely corral of musicians are setting up in the local coffee shop of the town I live in which is the town I ran to after I'd run to the wrong places. Which is the place where I am putting together this account for you about what it means to me to have exclusions within the self which is what it means to harbor exile. Wouldn't you like to see this shy tribe as I do? But I suppose it never feels like the right time to begin again anyway. So, yes, let's start with the car:

At the rental car agency I declined charging the car to the credit card listed on my joint account. That credit card belongs to the woman in the aforementioned affair. We

used rental cars frequently because, though it was unspoken, we understood that our relationship could not exist in reality. So we took it to unlikely places. *And these nights were being acted out under a foreign sky, with no one to watch, no penalties attached—it was this last fact that was our undoing, for nothing is more unbearable, once one has it, than freedom* (5). The first thing I can tell you is that because they asked how my partner with the lovely accent was doing I began my journey— that night I drove to Long Island to see a dance— with a mixture of remorse and fury. And I’ve told you nothing about that lovely accent or the unlikely places we ventured. That woman has a habit of consistently derailing my intentions, but I wouldn’t like to expose you to that at this point in our time together. *Even constant motion, of course, does not prevent an occasional mysterious drag, a drop, like an airplane hitting an air pocket* (20). I wonder how I can tell you about this experience atomically? What would you need to know to trust me? To risk your toes on the edge of the precipice or bow with me to this genuflection of communication? *People are too various to be treated so lightly. I am too various to be trusted* (5).

And I want very much for you to trust me.

My husband generally calls when I drive anywhere without her to remind me to stop for gas on the highway and to bring cash to pay for the tolls. I routinely turn feral during these phone calls and remind her that when she found me that day in that church with the Red Door in the West Village I’d covered plenty of miles without her. *There is something fantastic in the spectacle I now present to myself of having run so far, so hard, across the ocean even, only to find myself brought up short once more before the bulldog in my own backyard—the yard, in the meantime, having grown smaller and the bulldog*

*bigger* (6). She tells me though that once someone assumes a responsibility in a relationship, the other party naturally will abandon thinking about it. She says it happens to all couples. I tell her we are not a couple. She says you can't call a spade a spade if you've never seen one.

We are however emphatically not a couple. My husband is a woman. What we share is a quixotic paradox: when I do not answer her calls I invariably ride the car to empty and panic at strange hours to find a fueling station and almost always get bills in the mail for unpaid tolls.

But I just text her before I drive to Long Island that night because I am upset with her because I've been so sad lately and she's been so patient. Because I have felt incommunicable of late we have taken to talking while I'm in the grocery store so I can tell her about what I see like Ginsberg did with Whitman but I can't bear that that night so I text that I'll be over after the show.

We are getting off track again.

Before I drove to Long Island and after I texted my husband I called a man who had a great hand in saving my life and asked him for directions. He and I became quite close about a summer ago—I woke up from a hysterectomy that left me with a uterus and found him standing there in the hospital. We had known each other for about three weeks at the time. The first thing he told me when I woke up was about the time his partner Russ was in the hospital dying of AIDS. A cheerful Caribbean nurse rubbed Russ's feet on his deathbed and said that no one ever died who had warm feet. And Russ raised himself on weak arms and said, "you tell that to Joan of Arc." Many nurses came to check on me when they heard that much laughter in the Recovery Room. The man who

had a great hand in saving my life brought a young woman with him who generally called him “dad.” I’ve said elsewhere that when I met her she had a pink mohawk and the face of a nun, and that still feels right enough. *It was like holding in my hand some rare, exhausted, nearly doomed bird which I had miraculously happened to find. I was very frightened* (8)...Calling the man who had a great hand in saving my life resulted in two things: 1) fantastically articulated driving directions that accurately predicted traffic patterns and 2) it was the first time in some time that I’d thought of Anne Marie and her mohawk and the way she held my hand in the hospital. Great accounts of ordinary days are often punctured by women. For the storyteller, it is indicative of the capability of surprise. For the story itself however, it is lethal. After a woman enters the story ends, because then the story simple becomes an ordinary account of a great day.

But now the troupe of musicians have transmogrified into bellydancers—how quickly the pupa spread their dazzling wings! And I am now, what? Writing in a cafe that has been flooded by sequins? Would you call that writing? I have something to tell you. About patterns. Particularly ones we replicate in exile in order to feel whole again. Would it matter to you if I told you that a gypsy just asked who in the crowd identified themselves as scorpions? Would it matter to you if i didn’t raise my hand but made careful note of the women who did? How about if I called that a pattern? Would it matter to you if a dancer’s scarves just graced this page before wrapping around my ankle? Would you consider this the moment the story has been punctured? Would you tell my husband? Would you tell her if I told you that she’d be pleased?

But do you see how quickly I can be distracted from the heart of the thing? *And yet—when one begins to search for the crucial, the definitive moment, the moment which*

*changed all others, one finds oneself pressing, in great pain, through a maze of false signals and abruptly locking doors* (10). And now one eye is on the bellydancer and one eye is on the page and I wonder if you'll settle for half of me? *Of course, it is somewhere before me, locked in that reflection I am watching in the window as the night comes down outside. It is trapped in the room with me, always has been, and always will be, and it is yet more foreign to me than those foreign hills outside* (10).

I can't imagine it's right to only be halfway present to you, so I'll try to bring you with me:

The dancer is more mermaid less woman. There's a blonde that disappeared in the bathroom for a long while and I do not believe that she's well. She emerges from the bathroom as a sort of plasticine mixture of chipper, despair, and damage that I remain not uncompelled by. And I can't help but laughing now as I remember this message Johnny sent me while I was staying in Montmartre. He cautioned me then that I'd end up wasting my life at the Moulin Rouge and falling in love with a can-can dancer. But Johnny! Of course, I want to tell you about Johnny. He is the reason after all that I rented a car and drove to Long Island that night.

The blonde cannot smile as the mermaid can. We should be kinder, really.

Johnny asked me to rent a car and drive to Long Island that night because he is one of the six dancers in Paul Taylor's second company. He is also my very best friend; we've presently been friends for longer than he will admit to being alive. We imagine that our message log to each other will single handedly resuscitate the epistolary literary tradition. But how would anyone decipher our secret language? Perhaps I can give you a few clues. We say that in her next role Meryl Streep will win an Oscar for playing a

lamppost. We love her as much as we love Nicole Kidman. We love watching them both in *The Hours*. There's this one scene when Meryl is chopping vegetables, getting ready for a dinner party (you remember, like Mrs. Dalloway?) and trying to keep from breaking down entirely. Her daughter (Claire Danes) walks in and Meryl does this strange gyration with her shoulder and says, "I'm having a bit of a—gyrate, gyrate—strange morning." I forget if I was the one who was exhibiting appalling behavior in public or if it was in fact Johnny but one of us said to the other, "who do you think you are? Meryl in the kitchen?" And over time we've truncated the code to, "are you having a kitchen scene?" and named the set "mobile" when we realized how easy it was to stage the scene in front of company...

You might say it's silly but I need to tell you this because I don't know how you'll ever know me without knowing Johnny. And how could you know Johnny without knowing his predilections for dancing, chopping vegetables, me, and Meryl Streep?

Since the first time I saw Johnny on stage when I was a little girl he has taught me plenty about the patterns of human beings—particularly particularly close ones—before I watched him in "Cascade." Before he showed me what it looks like when you catch the wrong girl...*and I suppose such tenderness has scarcely ever produced such terror as I then felt* (105).

See, it's Johnny I've wanted to tell you about all along.

But when I got to Long Island that night I'd almost run out of gas so I stopped at a fueling station and was reminded that I had been there before with that girl who was standing next to the man who had a great hand in saving my life the day I went to the hospital for a hysterectomy and woke up with a uterus. It was the second time that night



that I'd thought about Anne Marie. I messaged my husband: "I forgot this place is such a fucking nightmare" and she told me not to text and drive.

(2)

By now I imagine you've guessed that I had to leave the bellydancing charade? I had to relocate; I have a peculiar aversion to watching women try to do things to please me. I'm much more capable of accepting kindness when it comes "in spite" and when that mermaid came so close to my face my stomach began to churn. It was only worsened when she sat down next to me, put her hair up, and smiled. *What a long way, I thought, I've come—to be destroyed!* (104). I wonder if you ever have had moments when all outward appearances seem to be precisely what you want, but are, at their core, wrong. Same pattern, wrong partner. When patterns replicate themselves in exile the eye and the heart duel between allowing your soul to be reclaimed by ghosts or continuing on in a deeper hollow. You begin to wonder that if nothing can matter, perhaps everything does.

But I've since become rather distracted. Abandoned this account as I daresay I will again. It was my intention to tell you more last night, but I became incredibly irritated and could not have been entirely in my right mind. If I had told you more of this account last night and I had not been in my right mind would it have been less true? If something is persistently true during disorientation, can it be true to someone who is experiencing mental stasis? I am asking you if you think I can be consistently reliable while I exhibit such peculiar displays of outward agitation? Well, you tell me. Last night my husband and I went to a friend's poetry reading in Williamsburg. At the reading there

was a woman with dark lipstick who sat next to my husband. My hallmark is that I don't feel or react to jealousy.

I used to be an incredible bitch, particularly to men....*it does seem—well, difficult—to be at the mercy of some gross, unshaven stranger before you can begin to be yourself* (125). During a decade of bulimia I commodified men and women, reduced it—a dance between bodies— all to transactional exchanges. But when I gave up bulimia it seems that as my ribs began to disappear back into my body, so did some of my judgments. In fact, *the war in my body was dragging me down* (144) and I began to reevaluate what it means to value a body.

So it should shock you as much as it shocked me when I told my husband, “If you invite her to dinner I'll claw her eyes out first just so you can watch.”

And my husband said, “My hallmark is that I don't feel or react to jealousy.”

But she was smiling. She's never so proud of me as when I'm feral.

*It had been so once; it had almost been so once. I could make it so again, I could make it real. It only demanded a short, hard strength for me to become myself again* (104). I said, “You resuscitated this bitch energy, now you can deal with it.”

She smiled again and said, “Bring it.”

At dinner she asked for a salad with no olives and I asked if she were sure and she told the waiter, “My wife would like my olives on the side of my salad.”

And our poet friend asked me later if it wasn't ironic that I'd grown so comfortable playing wife? And I asked her if I weren't negating the stereotype by both exploring and enjoying the vacuity of it?...*I invented in myself a kind of pleasure in*

*playing the housewife* (88)...And she laughed and pointed to my husband and said, “you know she can talk to anyone” and I said, “yes, just not that bitch with the dark lipstick.”

Can you know me without knowing my predilections for emotional carnage?

*For I am—or I was—one of those people who pride themselves on their willpower, on their ability to make a decision and carry it through. This virtue, like most virtues, is ambiguity itself* (20). This feral behavior I was exhibiting (you could call that a doll-sized kitchen scene) came right on the heels of a different fight I’d just had with my husband. In anger I told her that I didn’t want her to father me. And when we made up I said, “thanks, daddy” and when I found out how much she enjoyed that I began to use it as a power play as often as I could but then at the end of a different fight she said “Tell daddy how he can fix this” and she sucked all the power from the room. *People who believe that they are strong-willed and the masters of their destiny can only continue to believe this by becoming specialists in self-deception* (20). I wonder if you’ve ever worked through your own daddy issues with a woman who wears a custom made suit everywhere she goes? Pirate tattoos up and down her arms. A gun next to a rose on her right thigh. Faded stars on either side of her face. A cosmic topography that hosts a detective’s mind.

I don’t imagine that I was dealt a particularly easy “daddy” hand. His cocaine habit dictated a rather violent presence in the house. But, unlike many children, I never experienced the moment where he became anything less than I believed him to be. My hero was never transformed; I recognized him as a monster from the outset and I was never given grounds to reevaluate my conclusions. I imagine it is because I disassociated

so early from him that I never sought out an ulterior paternal presence; I simply thought things functioned better without it.

But in exile, the parameters are different. Even when we've warmed to the vacuity as a sort of safety, we are sometimes still propelled to fill it. We've also no boundary about what piece fits in what hole—the hope is that you melt what you find into a sort of warm elixir that you swallow and cross your fingers that it expands through the void.

I thought I'd lost this Bitch Fragment I've been telling you about. Left it half dressed in a gypsy cab or racking up a hotel bill or negatively impacting a marriage, but here she is. Interrupting (just like a woman) my account of that night that I drove to Long Island. She's surfaced as if from a bog. And, like the recovered bog bodies, she's entirely intact. *I felt, unwillingly, not for the first time, the cunning of the desperate* (140). Do you think we could ever really lose ourselves if we can't seem to shake any of the shame-producing phantoms that seem to hover just below the surface of the self we allow in public? I can't lose the wrecking ball self though I've changed her diet. I can't lose the desire to escape though my body is grounded now by what it has become. *I think now that if I had had any intimation that the self I was going to find would turn out to be only the same self from which I had spent so much time in flight, I would have stayed at home* (21). I can't help it, really, that I haven't forgotten the rules of the game even though I believed myself to be safe on base.

Can you fix this, daddy?

Will you return with me, once more, to that night I rented a car and drove to Long Island?

I met Johnny's mom Cecilia and Johnny's twin brother Tommy in the lobby of the theater and asked Cecilia how her drive was. Cecilia, a Peruvian opera singer, was wearing red lipstick and a fur coat. She flung one Latin-tempered hand over her head and said, "Do not even ask." When I was a child one of my favorite moments (sort of like in Tennyson's telling, when Ulysses and crew see too far, too much of Olympus, so they are punished?) was when I'd overhear her singing opera while she vacuumed. She's got the same sort of majesty as a sliver of moonlight though she's not nearly so ephemeral; I do not believe that she has aged since I met her. That was now over twenty years ago. Is it possible, do you think, that there is something that persists internally for more than 20 years? That can tie you to another life? I thought of course, when I told you that just now, of an umbilical connection. But it has not been proven true to me that umbilical connections produce long-term affection or admiration. But now *that* is a woman who would do nothing but distract. We'll leave her out of this, while I still have a say in that....*I lay in the dark and...dreamed of the touch of hands...hands which would have the power to crush me and make me whole again* (88).

And you've not even cajoled me yet that what persists for me unequivocally is a love of women who wear fur coats and red lipstick. *But it seemed to me that morning that my ancient self had been dreaming the most dangerous dream of all* (146).

I sat with Tommy and Cecilia during Johnny's performance. (Johnny, Johnny, this account is of course about Johnny! Would you consider it to be punctured? Can you follow?) During the first number I'd say we kept remarkably cool. During the second we certainly broke the seal, grabbed each other's knees and audibly gasped as Johnny leapt and dazzled and threw himself and covered every inch of floor space. And by the third

dance we were out of control, holding hands, “oh no he didn’t!”-ing regardless of who heard us. I’ve been watching that man make those leaps for over two decades and I have never once felt any prouder than I did that night I drove to Long Island.

After the show there was a message from my husband reminding me that I was supposed to come over to her Upper West Side apartment so we could go dancing, which I have an aversion to; I don’t enjoy it at all when I’m the one who has to take the leap. *I began to see that, while what was happening to me was not so strange as it would have comforted me to believe, yet it was strange beyond belief. It was not really so strange, so unprecedented, though voices deep within me boomed, For shame! For Shame!...what was strange was that this was but one tiny aspect of that dreadful human tangle occurring everywhere, without end, forever* (62).

“There must be some place we can go to eat” said Cecilia and I thought that settled the matter and excused me from keeping plans with my husband.

When we walked into the chain restaurant it was really quite crowded and we sniggered that it must be the best of Long Island. We sat down at the bar and Johnny ordered a dry martini and handed it to Cecilia, “She never orders or pays for her own drinks.” I thought that Tommy was acting a little strange but it was evidently equally my own internal projection. He asked what I was thinking about and I told him about the weekends I used to spend in Long Island with the girl with the pink mohawk and the face of a nun when her dad was sick and we’d come to spend the day with her brother’s young daughters. And I wondered if her nieces knew that I had left them, too. *“I’m sorry,” I said, suddenly. “I’m sorry.” I did not know how to say what it was I was sorry for* (18).

Would you reevaluate your opinion of me if I told you that I left them the day that I met my husband? *I thought only, One day I'll weep for this. One of these days I'll start to cry* (145).

At the dinner table, Tommy kept repeating, "But you know how John washes his feet." We'd discussed the process at intermission, actually. Johnny holds on to the soap rest in the tub to really scrub his feet which is where Tommy lines up the bottles of shampoo. So, obviously it would have been a concern we spoke about when Johnny recently moved into Tommy's place in Washington Heights. When Tommy broached the topic with me at intermission he was shocked to realize that I understood the details of Johnny's routine so atomically. I was shocked by his surprise and kept wondering why he kept repeating that line about Johnny's feet at dinner, "but you know..."

Cecilia asked me if my parents had deciphered where I'd run to and I said "absolutely not" and asked her if she thought it was wrong that I'd abandoned a psychotic mother....*perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition* (92). With a martini in one hand, she used her free hand to bang on the table and give me a stern narrow-eyed stare: "your survival is not about her."

*"Beautiful logic," I said. "You mean I have a home to go to as long as I don't go there?"*

*He laughed. "Well, isn't it true? You don't have a home until you leave it and then, when you have left it, you never can go back"* (116).

And I was going to thank her for settling the matter so definitively but Tommy interrupted with his Raven's *nevermore*: "but you know how John washes his feet..."

Neither me nor Cecilia nor Johnny should have been shocked, then, when Tommy proceeded to tell me about a date he went on with a man. Johnny and I grabbed each other under the table and tried to remain imperturbably cool above. Tommy has had a long struggle with coming to terms with his sexuality; his candidness with me was evident of a tremendous progress. Somebody...*your father or mine, should have told us that not many people have ever died of love. But multitudes have perished, and are perishing every hour—and in the oddest places! for lack of it* (58).

When I was young I was sexualized by an older female friend and instead of inviting an easy relationship to sexuality—(she told me later that at seven years old I told her that all of her clothing looked better after she developed breasts)—*But the end of innocence is also the end of guilt* (112)—I was reluctant to participate in something I considered to be a rather obvious choice. *Perhaps everybody has a garden of Eden, I don't know; but they have scarcely seen their garden before they see the flaming sword* (25). I became incredibly envious of openly gay couples, longed for such simple graces as I went through the motions of dalliances with the opposite sex. But I never risked leaping, really. *Then, perhaps, life only offers the choice of remembering the garden or forgetting it. Either, or: it takes strength to remember, it takes another kind of strength to forget, it takes a hero to do both* (25). I didn't really leap until that aforementioned affair with the aforementioned lovely accent and aforementioned absence of reality. *People who remember court madness through pain* (25)...Would you say that the story is coming around? Would you call this full circle? Johnny was the first person I'd confided in. I told him: "I think I'm gay because I really rather prefer to sleep with women" and he agreed and asked what we should order for dinner.



Surely, now, coming out over dinner with Johnny is coming full circle?

Do you believe it to be my decision to leave you at the dinner table (like Mrs. Ramsay) now that we've come to such an agreeable conclusion? Or is it my duty to talk you through the hugs we exchanged? Or my drive home? Or my fight and subsequent apology to my husband? Would you believe it if I told you that I had no cash to pay the tolls on the way back?

I wonder if you could know me without knowing the pieces, atomically.

*People are always saying, we must wait, we must wait. What are they waiting for? (37)*

I am asking myself now what it means to present to you such a fragmented account of such a fragmented pattern, but the source remains pure. *Why would I want to poison you? Then I would have no job and I have only just found out that I want to live* (49). The heart of the thing is that this fragmented account of a fragmented pattern is what I've come to understand as a kind of "after."

Exile requires a rather different set of rules if we are to actually continue on it.

Epigraph to Murakami's *IQ84* and Song by Bill Rose and E. Y. "Yip" Harburg:

It's a Barnum and Bailey World

just as phony as it can be.

But it wouldn't be make believe

if you believed in me.

But even after we have been rejected from the kingdom we cannot always escape the fortified walls...In *Giovanni's Room* Baldwin writes: "But people can't, unhappily,

invent their mooring posts, their lovers and their friends, anymore than they can invent their parents. Life gives these and also takes them away and the great difficulty is to say Yes to life” (5). Atomically speaking, I would like to begin to understand what I have been moored to. And what there is left to hold on to.

Some time ago I prayed to have the slickness of an oil slip. Before the night I drove to Long Island I lost two parents (though corporeally, their hearts may still be beating), friends, love, a home, a beloved pet, several organs, and a shattered concept of who I believed myself to be. We get to begin again anytime we’d like, this I believe. But I haven’t yet begun to discern how to push away the fragments that surface in new beginnings. There are holes in the dam—the water creeps inu knew, and, I must bow to the ghosts in stockinged feet I’ve left next to wrecked jukeboxes. Would you say that I’ve made it out?

Each day I greet seems to me to be a bittersweet infusion of what I have left behind and what I have yet to want—this is what I am talking about when I talk about exile.

(3)

The relationship I’ve presented to you about my husband is rather a more complicated one than I’ve let on. She is not a mooring post. But a narrative about Johnny (and substitute here anything that is good and right and true) that becomes a longing for a father’s approval through the body of a woman is something we might be able to call one of my two or three repeating stories. A “pattern,” if you prefer.

Let me try to explain.

Things with my husband became more complicated than they were when I first began this account of the night I drove to Long Island, but the complications seem to have brought me rather closer to the exile that Baldwin allows to unfold—almost tidally—back and forth through *Giovanni's Room*. I remembered, as I felt it surface within my own consciousness of the complexities of having lived “double,” that the beauty of *Giovanni's Room* is that it is actually a masquerade: it presents itself as geographic exile, but it is actually an exile within the heart. The bulldog—grown larger—that you run into again in the yard.

As things grew more complicated, I began to realize that I'd done once before:

After I was in fact in love with the aforementioned affair that could not exist in reality and after that aforementioned affair disintegrated in a series of cataclysmic actions—many of which involved rental cars purchased with aforementioned joint account—I got very upset, very drunk, and flew to Paris. I remember (sommelier) several fragments: a gypsy held the train door with his foot for which I gave him a euro; a man offered to show me Sacre-Coeur and the only French I could muster was, loosely, “please God no wine”; I drank a remarkable amount of champagne with strangers; and then I woke up under an overpass in Montmartre. My phone was conveniently tucked in my pocket. There was one message, from her, that read: “Wherever you are, get home safe.” This was her way of rescinding on a planned reunion.

And I believe it was that moment that taught me a sort of resignation I'd never felt before. Perhaps it was in fact the beginning of my exile. Like most little girls, I had once held big dreams of Paris. Unlike most little girls, my childhood was diluted by opiates. I would like to pose here that my opiate consumption only increased the hallucinatory

euphoria I'd imagined. I have seen and read many accounts of what it means to be in love in Paris, but I would also like to pose that my bridge scene was both a pattern fulfilled and hallucination incensed: if to be in love in Paris is a dream, to be heartbroken in Paris takes on the quality of legend. The night David met Giovanni:

I wished, nevertheless, standing there at the bar, that I had been able to find in myself the force to turn and walk out—to have gone over to Montparnasse perhaps and picked up a girl. Any girl. I could not do it. I told myself all sorts of lies, standing there at the bar, but I could not move. And this was partly because I knew that it did not really matter anymore; it did not even matter if I never spoke to Giovanni again; for they had become visible, as visible as the wafers on the shirt of the flaming princess, they stormed all over me, my awakening, my insistent possibilities. (42)

I wonder if part of the queer identity requires the acceptance that the other is both one in the same and radically irreconcilable, all at once. If the other is both what evinces hope and despairs of it. Or if the other could be the part of yourself which allows for possibility, like overwrought scarabs, to crawl across the surface and demand you live closer to the heart of the thing. But the danger is that once, of course, the scarabs are on the loose, they cannot *quite* be tempered:

Until I die there will be those moments , moments seeming to rise up out of the ground like Macbeth's witches, when his face will come before me, that face in all its changes, when the exact timbre of his voice and tricks of his speech will nearly burst my ears....I will see Giovanni again, as he was that night, so vivid, so winning, all of the light of that gloomy tunnel trapped around his head. (42-43)

The thing about the enactment of a legend you thought you wished to happen is that legends can be *contained* by the page—though they radiate beyond their form. In the quixotic reenactment of legend, however, the pieces are never quite so congruent. Particularly when the heart is involved. They get away from you. Trip you up. And you'll tell yourself that it's topography but you can call it "Paris" all you'd like because what it really is is just some moonscape—a legend realized is an irremediably strange terrain of the heart.

While I was in Paris—geographically—I made a sort of routine. I promised myself I would miss no monument on account of my heartache. But just as soon as I got through said monument I was excused to behave exactly how I wished to behave—and you can may well imagine how conducive that city can be for an oblivion junky. And it was. By day I'd ride the metro and sit with gypsies and drag queens and talk to strangers in broken French. I spent most days inside museums, even jotting down some notes. And at night I would get wickedly drunk and throw opiates into jugs of wine and hope that I did not vomit on any of the people I was sharing a room with. This, at the time, was my idea of "balance."

As I've said, my father was quite an angry man and his temper was heightened by a dreadful cocaine habit. When I was a little girl I would do a headstand at his feet almost every night and close my eyes—you offer the body to brutality to defy being taken by it.

One of the patterns I maintained in Paris was taking long walks along the Champs Elysees. It was rather painful; I was at the point in my addiction where I looked like what Kerouac calls a "bentback mudman monster" and my feet burned. But I kept walking.

Kept trying to take in the beauty. I did not experience any reprieve. Not on one of any of those walks.

One day I braved the Louvre and was pretty quickly overwhelmed. When I walked outside there was a field of large dogs running in circles, some sort of pet daycare run by gypsies. And I sat on the grass with them and remember that it was the one precise moment of peace or serenity or realized gentleness that I'd experienced in quite some time. And as the massive Great Danes and Golden Retrievers bounded into the sunset, I wept. I wept for envy. For the strange inclination that my heart may be made of more dog than person. For the lack of consequence of their brave running. For the easy camaraderie. And for how far my heartache had carried me from taking part in heart-based actions. It was a different kind of offering of body.

One that exile no longer permits me to offer to my husband.

(4)

It has been years since Paris—not many, but enough. Last week my husband and I went to Washington DC to celebrate the New Year. I cancelled this trip more than once before we took it. She knows some about the aforementioned affair and the bridge and the dogs. But do you imagine it is wholly possible to tell someone what it feels like to wake up in (internal)/desolation and feel at home?

I could not sleep in DC out of an unrelenting anger. The daddy power structure has become tiring and encompassing and has bred resentment. So I took a walk. My husband always takes care of all of our hotel bookings, so I was not too sure where we were, but it turns out we were just a few short blocks from the Capitol building. It was

New Year's day and I imagined that most of the world was still asleep. But when I got to the other side there was a sea of dogs in the field behind the Capitol. And I sat down in the middle of them and let them run up to me and talked to proud parents, one who shared that his son took his first steps holding on to his dog's ears...and as you might imagine, I wept.

Do you remember I told you that a woman sexualized me when I was quite young? She was my favorite hallucinogen. She was the most remarkable trip I've ever taken. And I have chased her ever since. The packaging has changed radically, but, ultimately, I long to have a reserve of innocence (that I've carried through abuse) consumed by a woman who will understand just how to wreck it. It is my idea of ultimate safety—a headstand at the feet of brutality.

As I walked along the mall that morning I had intense memories of Paris. When drunken memories surface in a sober mind I find the effect to be quite visceral. I find that I anticipate my mind shutting down. I find that I anticipate a feeling of guarded oblivion. And I sort of realized that the similarities in Obelisks and the boundless dogs and the grandiosity of the buildings and the chilly morning wind on my face didn't feel so very different than I felt when I was wrecked in Montmartre. In fact I did not find it very odd at all that there was someone waiting in bed for me at a beautiful hotel that I wanted absolutely nothing to do with.

I've spent more time than I ought to admit wondering if exiles have the capacity to be surprised. Really, what is next after you offer your body to be consumed? And can it happen in one night, if you feel you've lived that night many times before?

When I got back to the hotel room, my husband and I tried very hard to be civil to each other. I found that it was remarkably easy—because in fact we were only residing in what I’ve come to understand as Pseudo France. I don’t imagine anything will be exactly as paramount as that heartache. And though it seems impossible to survive while it happens, I have found that it erects a certain scaffolding within the heart that cannot be easily scaled by another. The scaffolding of heartache may very well solidify the fortress walls, but it certainly protects against futile aims of penetration.

Imagine then, that in DC when my husband and I walked to dinner that evening we noticed that there was a neon art installation—hanging up under a bridge. And of course it would not survive without our investigation, so we sat under the bridge together speculating Rorschach conclusions on the images of the neon art on the ripples of the canal and I surprised myself almost as much as I did her when I said that I knew that her very worst fear was of losing me but I was certain then that I could not stay with her any longer.

This is rather a good time to divert you “...or else,” as Freud writes, “we would have to think of the enigmatic masochistic tendencies of the ego” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 11).

(5)

I believe that when we live in exile we must recreate loss in order to reclaim what once slipped away.

In Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* he has the fortune to observe a child in unguarded play, a play the child enacts each and every time his mother leaves him:



The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string wound round it. It never occurred to him, for example, to drag this after him on the floor and so play horse and cart with it, but he kept throwing it with considerable skill, held by the string, over the side of his little draped cot, so that the reel disappeared into it, then said his significant ‘o-o-o-oh’ and drew the reel by the string out of the cot again, greeting its reappearance with a joyful “Da’ (there). This was therefore the complete game, disappearance and return, the first act being the only one generally observed by onlookers, and the one untiringly repeated by the child as a game for its own sake, although the greater pleasure unquestionably attached to the second act.

(13)

Freud concludes that this game was an effort made by the child to make his mother’s disappearance “right” to himself; by letting it go in his own terms and equally reclaiming it—again and again— he was able to create a tangible understanding of both letting go and recapturing.

In Paris, I was not in touch with the disappearance and I was disoriented by love that could be so dissolvable. In DC I was cool as a cucumber; I initiated the loss to show that I could not be vanquished by it. What I am asking is this: is there a difference to watching grains of sand fall through your palms if you spread your fingers? Because to repeat the painful experience as a game might be the thing that both illustrates and supersedes the pleasure principle— if we are to understand that the child’s game translates departure into a prelude for a joyful reunion.

In *Giovanni's Room* When David recounts his first homosexual experience he does so in terms of “caverns”:

The power and the promise and the mystery of that body made me suddenly afraid. That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood. Precisely, I wanted to know that mystery and feel that power and have that promise fulfilled through me. (9)

At this point in his adolescence, David is still able to confuse another's body as a vessel that can clarify mystery—and therefore he can be at least disoriented by it, at most lost to it entirely. In my hallucinatory predictions of what Paris might be like, I imagined that whatever it would be would be bigger than me, and therefore it could swallow me whole. I was correct. I just did not anticipate that it would be something that I would survive.

David continues:

A cavern opened in my mind, black, full of rumor, suggestion, of half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words. I thought I saw my future in that cavern. I was afraid. I could have cried, cried for shame and terror, cried for not understanding how this could have happened to me, how this could have happened *in* me. And I made my decision. (9)

The mystery fulfilled, he was able to make his decision and leave. To be banished from an internal vacuity by way of primitive mystery is, I believe, the beginning of exile.

Edward Said defines exile as, “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be

surmounted” (173). I believe that if we were to consider each and every day atomically, we would be able to see and feel that each and every day is a composite of varied loss—dynamic, intrinsic exile. The child’s illustration of disappearance, the fort/da, suggests that we’ve an internal compulsive craving to learn the mechanisms of loss so that we may both pilot and end the machine. But actions say little about vacuity.

If we define “trauma” as an event that is “beyond the realm of common experience” we mitigate both the horrific and the extraordinary components of a day experienced atomically. Theory says that after trauma we should “act as if”—until we get the hang of living again. Write it down to avoid its repetition. But it says nothing about the inherent duality of encountering anything beyond: that while your perception of what constitutes a day radically and permanently changes, you become further exiled from a fundamental, internal safety. There are traumas we can repeat with relative ease. And there is a vacuum that bears no ability to be extrinsically produced, though we try.

When David remembers his first homosexual experience, he is both compelled by and terrified of the cavernous feelings of estrangement. Said cautions that the literature of exile can “banalize its mutilations” (174), but perhaps it gives rise to tangible vacuity.

Particularly when the cavern is only an explicit reenactment of a primal loss:

My mother had been carried to the graveyard when I was five. I scarcely remember her at all, yet she figured in my nightmares, blind with worms, her hair as dry as metal and brittle as a twig, straining to press me against her body; that body so putrescent, so sickening soft, that it opened, as I clawed and cried, into a breach so enormous as to swallow me alive. (11)

After the cavern is opened subsequent losses become indistinguishable. Which is why we both seek them and refuse them.

I think at bottom that is the reason that David is able to leave Giovanni:

I remember that life in that room seemed to be occurring beneath the sea. Time flowed past indifferently above us; hours and days had no meaning. In the beginning, our life together held a joy and amazement which was newborn every day. Beneath the joy, of course, was anguish and beneath the amazement was fear; but they did not work themselves to the beginning until our high beginning was a loss on our tongues. By then anguish and fear had become the surface on which we slipped and slid, losing balance, dignity, and pride. Giovanni's face...began to crack. (75)

It couldn't have been easy to leave Giovanni, but I bet it was impossible to stay. I think that reality can become intangible when the steps we take are carefully tread so as not to skirt the cavern's walls. Said poses, "Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people (177)" But when you are living in an exile from the heart, you only really become part of a restored people by virtue of myth-making. The reverberations of loss permeate the atomic qualities of a day, invest them, infect them, contaminate, and elevate until we feel split in two. One self propels us under the floorboards (fort!) while a second self pulls us back (da!); we are in a dialogue between what we cannot escape and what we are afraid to become. Board by board words—the story of the thing—create planks over the abyss. And maybe that's all we get, after all. A loaded opportunity to

stand at the edge of the ship and watch the sharks before we plummet into assured carnage.

(6)

I do not imagine that the cavern will consume me until it is good and ready. And so time and again I walk to the end of the plank and find myself back on board the ship.

After the bridge (in DC) my husband and I went to an Italian restaurant that was situated inside of a cottage along a canal. I cried so much I told the waiter that my grandmother had just died. I have never had a grandmother. I reminded my husband that our friend calls tears “wet prayers” and posited that we must be living in a negro spiritual, then. We called a cab after dinner and ended up sharing it with two young gay men who were on their way to a drag show and asked us to join them. And so we did.

I fluctuated between being consumed by the energy of the crowd and being unable to breathe very deeply. I stood behind my husband as we watched a young queen beautifully create a Beyonce hair flip until of course I felt rather trapped and walked to the bathroom.

In about a moment’s time, I was crying on the shoulder of a drag queen in said girl’s restroom and was grateful for the support of her strong, male shoulders. I stayed in there a good long while and when I came out I found a seat near the stage and away from my husband. Some time later she put her hands on my shoulders and kept repeating, “I thought you left, I thought you were gone” and with a shark’s eyes I said, “I wouldn’t do that to you.”

I would love to tell you that I then got on the train home, alone, or with that lovely queen and her lovely shoulders, but I didn't.

David never recovers from Giovanni's loss, even though, like the child's game, he was the one who initiated it:

Sometimes, in the days which are coming—God grant me the grace to live them—in the glare of the grey morning, sour-mouthed, eyelids raw and red, hair tangled and damp from my stormy sleep, facing, over coffee and cigarette smoke, last night's impenetrable, meaningless boy who will shortly rise and vanish like the smoke, I will see Giovanni again, as he was that night, so vivid, so winning, all of the light of that gloomy tunnel trapped around his head. (42)

I wonder if it takes inherent fragmentation for the light to be allowed to slip through the cracks. I've tried to show you the pattern I enacted between my "husband" and my "affair" because I wonder if I can externalize this—if you can see it to—perhaps I won't have to carry it any further. I wanted to much to show you something atomically—I wanted it to be proof that you cannot see the cavern, even with a microscopic lens. But I believe I opened its mouth.

The next day my husband and I went to the Hirshorn sculpture garden and I was delighted to see Marino Marini's "Horse and Rider" triumphant in the winter afternoon sun, the small rider, childlike and victorious. I asked my husband to stand in front of it while I looked up Frank O'Hara's "Having a Coke with You," where that sculpture makes a particularly delightful cameo. I remember that I stood behind her to read so in

case we entered back into the spiritual, I wouldn't have to make eye contact. But, true to the cavern's depth, I recited it just fine:

it is hard to believe when I'm with you that there can be anything as still  
as solemn as unpleasantly definitive as statuary when right in front of it

I watched her wipe her eyes while I read and we spent much of the rest of the day holding hands. When I dropped her off at her home in New York City I told her I hadn't changed my mind any about my looming departure. About two weeks went by without much contact. But then yesterday we had brunch on the Upper West Side. Maybe all I'd needed to do was prove to myself that I *could* leave so that I could stay without reservation.

But it's more likely that I retain a proclivity for seeking stasis by way of consistent destabilization. It's a savage energy that surfaces from the cavern's depths—an energy that may very well be the only thing that is strong enough to survive a fractured self. It's unlikely, but plausible, that when another person is with you under the bridge, you may very well be able to emerge together.

At brunch my husband told me that she knew exactly how to fix DC. She said she'd like to take me back there when the cherry blossoms are in bloom. And we can just try the whole thing over again. Only it will be beautiful.

"Oh, a sequel?" I asked, indignantly. And I gave her a rather hard time about what it means to live with one foot inside of a dream. I talked to many of my friends about this cock-eyed plan and waited anxiously for them to vindicate my anger. But I seemed to have received one unanimous response:

"Oh. She's good."

And one night, lying down on a blue velvet fainting sofa in my apartment I whispered into the phone: “you’d have won any number of my friends back with your cherry blossoms.” And she was delighted. I decided to leave her that night under the bridge because we couldn’t cop to any sort of commitment and we couldn’t back away from each other, either. We neither of us had handled the situation delicately. And since I’ve become rather well versed in packing my things, I didn’t see much of an obstacle in another departure—a continuance of an old pattern.

But the proposition of the cherry blossoms began to take root in my imagination. And I remembered an old story. When I was a child, my mother said she would take me for walks through a local garden and tell me the names of all of the flowers we would see. I can imagine that the life of an infant living with a manic-depressive and an active cocaine addict did not get many glimpses of such pure beauty. So it seemed natural when she told me that “flower” was the first word I ever said. What the infant in this story did is to look beyond her surroundings and direct her focus only towards a flickering beauty in a very problematic world. And when she named it, she made it hers.

Is it possible that exile can infantilize? So much so that perhaps we are new only after we are lost?

The very beauty of patterns, as I learned again the night I drove to Long Island to watch a dance, is that they change. Sometimes a new partner sullies the movements, strips the grace, intensifies the impact. And sometimes we find a sort of brutal gentleness in the mere willingness to repeat. I think the truth, like O’Hara says, is that we never pick the rider as carefully as we pick the horse. Particularly when we are conscious that there



is something that can consume all parties waiting right below the surface. But marvelously, we continue to ride.

I do not believe that Don Quixote is any less chivalrous just because the world doubts that he is a knight. And no one would dare call Rocinante anything less than the perfectly chosen horse. I wonder if the answer to exile rests in recognizing extrinsic beauty and—like an anachronistic knight—bowing before it. Shouldering it, as Aeneas did, to our new kingdoms. I wonder if the answer can be as simple as stillness in front of statuary. I wonder if the answer is to sit back, though our horses may be mismatched, and wait for the blossoms to return.

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