ISABEL:
Studies in Classic American Literature

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Lucy Diamond Biederman

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APPROVED

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Brian Gaudino: “A million times I remember seeing something moving in the peripheries of my vision just like this and wondering what is that. And being awed to find out it’s really something instead of just nothing…”—Bernadette Mayer, *Midwinter Day* (71)

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INTRODUCTION :

ISABEL, CIRCLES, BIOFICTION, THE PAST

Isabel.

Call me Isabel.

Call me Isabel,

And this will be a novel.

Circles.

We're ringing the *already*—

By Morning in America,

I was already me.

Biofiction.

Leslie Fiedler, in his forward to *Love and Death in the American Novel*, writes, this is a novel, too, I've written myself into the pretty part of literature…

haven't I?

The Past.

Throw the books in the fire! I'll rest my hand on the ancient stones of Rome.

Isabel.

Call me Isabel,

And this will be a novel about the past.

Isabel.

I've seen the other side of the moon, how hard and *un*calculating is his face at rest. And in that sight I saw how lightly I travel upon the surface of my only home. I didn't have to do all this reading to know how *that* would feel. I had heard it in the songs on the radio in fifth grade.

Isabel.

"What the meaning of the word is is" is the bell that rang when the class periods ended at Lab School.

Circles.

This book is a circle, a Mobius strip.

Circles.

WHAT?! All this is "an apprenticeship to the truth" (Emerson)? Then GIVE ME ANOTHER, a second go! Cries Dencombe at the health spa in James's "The Middle Years."

Biofiction.

Not the intersection but the *unclaimed field* between biography, fiction, and criticism.

Isabel,

lying on the couch

500 nights in a row,

even holidays,

my very life passing over me,

the *nature* of it,

a moon-forced wave.

The Past.

Looking back had not yet been invented. I'll go back and invent it, I'll change the past.

Biofiction.

A word to break the boundaries of genre.

Biofiction.

A word to establish additional boundaries.

Biofiction.

Some of these "studies" are the result of my scholarly work on nineteenth-century and contemporary American literatures, particularly the relationship of those two periods to one another.

The Past.

My misunderstandings: I have altered my world to suit them.

Biofiction.

I have *bound* this, although I didn't want to. I have behaved practically, although I am not practical. Changing my sheets, I have imagined falling to my knees at the bedside like big Don Gately in the halfway house in *Infinite Jest*. Teach me, Frank Bidart: "Teach me, masters who by making were remade, your art" (26).

Circles.

Teach me, Roland Barthes: “One must construct, i.e., *complete*, a piece of merchandise. While I write, the writing is thereby at every moment flattened out, banalized, made guilty by the work to which it must eventually contribute…”

The Past.

You belong to no one.

Circles.

“... And yet: The closer I come to the work, the deeper I descend into writing: I approach its unendurable depth; a desert is revealed; there occurs—fatal, lacerating—a kind of *loss of sympathy*: I no longer feel myself to be *sympathetic* (to others, to myself). It is at this point of contact between the writing and the work that the hard truth appears to me: *I am no longer a child*.” (*Barthes* 136 – 7)

Biofiction.

I am no longer a child. Every sentence I learn again. I am no longer a child.

The Past.

Dayana: “these are my biggest fears: that the time will come when references to the greatest stories will go unnoticed; when the act of reading, which implies a profound understanding of what the Humanities can do for the soul, will be perceived as a dispensable luxury; when deep, instant connections between people (between friends, between co-workers, between students and their teachers, between strangers) will be seen

as dangerous. I left Romania to live outside fear, and I refuse to think, write, and be guided by that fear now.”

Isabel.

I’ll live and die inside references, undistracted from self-scrutiny, indispensable luxury.

The Past.

The thick air of Lab School, almost bite-able, the tin radiator smell of the halls as we walked through them as a class, sorrow for home in the few hours each day I was away from it, the dark browns and grays in which I imagined the worlds of the books I read.

CHAPTER 1:

THE DICTIONARY OF OVERRULED IDEAS

BRUSHES

All the Way There. I could hear the language shooting through me, waiting to be born. Everything yellow. Yellow sky, yellow blankets, yellow everything before my life began.

Alternates. But I could have softened, I could have stopped saying it, I could have said okay.

Art Alley. Through a door off the hall that connected the middle school to the high school, a narrow arcade led to the Art History classroom, where, with the lights turned off and the shades drawn, in the dust-hued, radiator-heated 8 am air, I can’t recall a single slide she showed us.

Before. The late-afternoon amber light in which my parents existed before me is evocative of the upper floors of some of the nicer tenements in *How the Other Half Lives* and the mournful, romantic feeling that attaches to the hard but academic life of the main character in Philip Roth's early, Russian-style novel, *Letting Go*.

Bixler. My brother and I dug a giant sloppy mountain next to a mote.

I kissed him outside the playground, what's the big deal.

Blackstone. I lingered in the hallway, in the area by the front door. Our house was dark and cold, in the shade of a winter tree. Everyone at school hated me. I accidentally wore t-shirts that drew attention. I kept raising my hand to disagree. I envied the quiet, dignified nerds on TV.

Books. Assignment:

Write the ratio of the books in your room that you have read to the total books in your room.

Hint: $\frac{\text{Books you have read}}{\text{Total books}}$

Her eyebrows were low and much darker than her hair. I was thorough in all the wrong places, slapdash where it turned out to matter. She sat with me at a table off to the side and we had to go over it again.

“So you have 254 books in your room?”

It had taken me hours to count them. It was hard not to lose track, and every time I made it all the way through, I came up with a different number. I was worn out and angry when they called me for dinner, and as I left my room, I passed the three grocery bags of books Caroline brought from the Rummage Sale. I fell to the floor and cried in anguish like a woman on *Dallas*.

“What’s wrong, Lucy?” Daddy called from dinner. I could hear the amusement in his voice, the humor that he held out like a sword when he touched my life, and I hated him with real, adult hatred, targeted and accurate, like midnight taxis shooting up and down the Drive. “Stop *laughing*!” I told him a hundred, thousand, hundred million times.

“Is that right?” she asked.

“Actually, when I was done counting, I realized I had forgotten to count three bags of books.”

“Well *that* certainly makes a difference, doesn’t it?” She looked angry.

Stop laughing, I don’t know why it’s so serious to me, it doesn’t matter, no one’s listening and who cares. Other kids came over to give her their sheets, done perfectly: ten books, thirteen. I saw how simple it could be, but it being so simple to them meant nothing to me.

Brightness. I returned to class while everyone was in gym. I got a lot of migraines that year. Laura wouldn't come near me, because, she said, I might still be contagious. The metal fence between the field we stood in and the tennis courts gleamed. I was very large and far away.

Brushes. I sat in his lap in the sunlight. A yellow hand towel covered one of the armrests. He built me a bike or something while I was sleeping, and then my brother was born. I ran out into the afternoon. *No Running in the Hall*. The doors in the apartment were closed and creaky. I ran out into the midnight and banged. They hated me, held me and spanked me. I was a bad, bad girl and I went out alone.

Coffee. Everyone always likes coffee. Not me. Not me, I'm different than everyone else. I'm different than myself, and I don't feel like coffee today.

Dayenu. I can't believe no one's listening. If the untold or imperfectly articulated moments have never been read or even opened, then what? I can't believe no one's listening, but that's what I believe.

Discrete. Staring at the stem of my thumb for hours, the default field I pictured was closed for the day, so there was nowhere to look with my "mind's eye." If she calls on me, I thought, I'll just sit here and keep looking forward, not say a word, no matter how long she waits for me to answer. Everyone gives up eventually. A girl fell asleep at her desk and died later that year. I was one of the worst in the room.

Drawers, chests, and wardrobes (I). I forgot that the window-seat was also a chest that I had kept my sweaters in, and I moved away forever without taking them. "A casket is a dungeon for objects." Who knows how deep it went. It was worth it, never opening it again.

Drawers, chests, and wardrobes (II). I had a pink chest with a lock that I kept my poetry in, a diary with a soft pink waterproof cover and a lock, and a large, hardcover book of Emily Dickinson poems "for girls." I lied in my diary, but timidly, less full-on factual lies than lies of atmosphere. Failures of feeling. "The lock doesn't exist that could resist absolute violence, and all locks are an invitation to thieves."

Emergency. At the end of a row of tall, soft chairs in a warm room with pastel, Victorian wallpaper and floor-to-ceiling windows covered in elaborate beige drapery, listening to Helen Vendler talk about Keats, I was so bored that I literally couldn't wait to leave. An appropriate stopping point, a pause or cough, couldn't come soon enough. I had to leave immediately.

Entertainers. I draped myself across the carpeted steps that led to the kitchen. She stood around stirring, tall and backlit like a star of the stage.

"Why is Daddy so much nicer than you?" I drawled.

"Because you never see him."

Every new book a pending nightmare. One morning I woke to find three grocery bags of chapter books on the floor, flattening my carpet. The kids in them were as floppy and unpleasant as rag dolls. They vomited, told on each other, and rode bikes. Each new book, I promised myself, would be the last. All night knocking on doors in my mind, I didn't want to know what was behind them, but I couldn't stop trying. Then, wanting to turn back from where I had come, I found the paths by which I'd traveled altered by the light of the new.

Failer. The deep rushing under-where, it's so shallow, I'll never touch it, it doesn't matter.

Floaters. The ceiling in my bedroom went up to the sky. I once saw Babar there, floating in the corner. There was a pigeon in the open bathroom window. I couldn't tell if it was inside or out. I couldn't tell if it was in a book or in real life. I didn't know whether or not to tell. I didn't know whether or not to yell. Its bad doll eye, important bosom like the prow of a ship. She came and put it back where it belonged.

The Gap. Everything that happened then is in the past. It was the past even as it was happening, the books I read, the tires on my car, the songs they played on the speakers at the Gap. I no longer see the packaging on the types of food I ate then. I wrote the companies and had them redesigned. I changed the signs above stores, changed my name, changed the English language. I changed the locks on every door in the neighborhood.

H.M.S. Room 121. Alone all day at school on the deck of the ship that was visible to everyone but the teacher, I scrubbed the floors during a storm. The blond girls were the princesses. Afterward, Brendan and I walked to his house, where he cried and then peed in his pants. He barely seemed to mind, but I was humiliated. I couldn't stop thinking about it when I got home and for the next two decades.

The Hyperreal. We never made it to the twentieth century, where severe, politicized shapes on paper yielded to wild sights like a sculpture of an ugly, freckled obese woman in a bright yellow t-shirt pushing a full grocery cart, labeled "hyperrealism." I flipped to that page every day in class. I could feel it pulsing when the book was closed.

I Love You. The whole class was writing it, giving it to the teacher, even the bad kids. The bad kids seemed to like it most of all. I hated it. I avoided her, so she wouldn't teach me to write it. "*I-love-you* is without nuance. It suppresses explanations, adjustments, degrees, scruples. In a way—exorbitant paradox of language—to say *I-love-you* is to proceed as if there were no theater of speech" (Barthes LD 148). I kept moving chairs so she wouldn't find me, further toward the exit of the theater. I saw all the boys standing in a ragged line peeing when I looked down the hall. Their penises were showing, like baby flowers in the Amazon, their bright shorts around their ankles, the teacher sort of standing guard at the door, but facing toward the boys rather than the hall. The radiators smelled like brownie-mix brownies baking.

I Will Not Go To School Today. Thumping myself on my bed in the extra-annoying way I invented, I could see to the miserable end of this. Please, *please*. Even if I'm wrong. My soul hurt, my very self within the ruined world. Mommy, I said, make a Caliban of me and teach me how to curse. Cuddled like a cutie, I thought, I'll tear my self apart. Let me stay home, I saw on a TimeLife infomercial what happens to people like me.

Intruder. While we were playing with the triplets at the end of the street, a shadow in rags stole the kick-the-can. It wasn't scary.

J'aime, je n'aime pas. I like—television, Philip Roth, being by myself, clean rooms, long novels, Bic gel pens, Henry James, Marxism, Richard Wright, exercise, Walter Benjamin, country music, bread with butter, blueberries, essays, Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, writing in a coffee shop, Washington, D.C., Nan Goldin, making coffee, Nicholson Baker, patriotism, radio, Chips Ahoy!, Joyce Carol Oates, Mary Gaitskill, taking the stairs, Madison Bumgarner, structuralism, cereal, flat landscapes, psychoanalysis, flossing, etc.

I dislike—Facebook, handsome men, poetry bloggers, pencils, knee-jerk liberalism, small talk, shoe shopping, dust, being hungry, lilies, cats, concerts, documentary films, Joan Didion, *The Rumpus*, J.D. Salinger, Hemingway, *The Great Gatsby*, Vonnegut, Philip K. Dick, detective stories, parables, being away from home, workplace hierarchies, popular science, hotels, speeches, planned events of any kind, alcoholic drinks, decorative scarves, etc.

"I like, I don't like: this is of no importance to anyone; this, apparently, has no meaning. And yet all this means: *my body is not the same as yours*" (Barthes, *Barthes* 117).

The Key. There's something I'm ashamed of that I can't remember. It's the reason no one wants to have sex with me.

Laughing. “I laugh because I’m nervous,” he said when he finally called me back.

“It’s not funny, though.”

“No, Lucy, of course it’s not funny.”

“So stop laughing!”

And then he fucking *laughed*.

But I could have softened, I could have stopped demanding it, I could have said okay.

Looking. I hungered for the rich hues in which other people spent high school. I heard them fighting in the halls. Their anger was as elegant as an old Indian’s arrowhead. Their thin wrists lay fallow at their sides.

Living. My unwillingness to try new medicines for migraines, the way I stay in the house extra days after I’ve been sick, or when I’m hardly ill: I would and will fold over, I’ll give myself away. “The doctor said he never saw anyone with so little will to live. I don’t want to live, he thinks. But Faithy, I do, I do. It’s just I’m scared” (“Living,” Grace Paley).

Migraineaholic. The summer between high school and college I couldn't stop getting them, like not being able to stop eating. I went to see a doctor and he said, "Are you having a migraine right now?" and when I said yes, I felt embarrassed, as if he had asked me if I were having an orgasm. The word "migraine" embarrasses me, like an outline or inverse of who I think I am.

I have gotten a migraine:

During a job interview

During the most important volleyball game of the season

While watching *The Talented Mr. Ripley* in the theatre

At the Pancake House with my grandma

At my grandma's country club

During therapy

On a plane

When I had the flu

During a migraine

In Mexico

During a yoga class

While going to sleep

While waking up

As I answered the phone

While moving to a new apartment

Mimesis and Me. I wish there were a special room, either at school or at home, I told Mr. Wilson, though he wasn't really listening, and when the door was closed, you wouldn't know there was anything unusual about it. But when you opened the door, it looked like the Amazon, with huge bright green leaves drooping from the ceiling, ropy brown vines hiding the walls, pink and purple flowers springing from the floor, a network of nature, its wild colors. But it was all *plastic*! When I imagined the room, it thrilled me. I drew pictures of it sometimes. I loved to imagine its corners, where the fake trees were forced to bow their heads and redirect toward the floor. But what was most important eluded my drawing skills: How could I show through *drawing* that what appeared natural was only pretend? Like Henri Rousseau's primary-colored jungles, but unframed. And, in my jungle, there would be no beasts but me. A giant green leaf pushed against a wall, cast down like a fan. *Primary*: before reality, another made-up world. "Imagine with me an Absolute Book of Unnatural Nature, fully immersive, polysensory, eloquent, in which everything is reactive, self-replicating; a mutable, complex, and functioning system with which the reader—who is now far more than reader—may interact as she does with the real. Will such an artifice allow us to be more fully alive?" (Ducornet 23)

Monday. I stepped to the top step of the staircase in the high school. The English Department office was behind me, on the other side of the staircase. A sense of the confusing ending of *The Catcher in the Rye* clung to its doorway. I didn't know what was real and what was supposed to be a dream.

Monday. I stepped to the top step of the staircase. The French Department office was in front of me. They dressed like clowns, with ruffled collars and colorful hats, and spoke to

each with the same loud, slow French they used with us class. *Kawmaw tolley vwu, Madda-Mwazel Biederman?*

Monday. I stepped to the top step of the staircase. Nothing bad had ever happened to me—*nothing*—but I was so miserable, I was barely conscious.

Monday. I stepped to the top step of the staircase. I was sure something bad was about to happen. My brother was about to die, my mother, my entire family all at once.

Monday. I stepped to the top step of the staircase. Was this the second, this one, this one, where my life folds down?

More Brightness. I walked home in the middle of the day, another migraine. The school nurse had said I could. I spent many days of many years lying in her office on a cot behind a partition trying not to vomit. I didn't know her name. The sun was throwing itself all over everything, totally indiscriminate. When I got home, I realized I didn't have my key. I crumpled on the steps and sweated. I was barely human. The minutes would pass and I would get inside, but I knew now how much I could suffer and stay awake. God made a bad world and I was in it.

No. Lucy, why don't you try drinking coffee? Daddy suggested. You'll concentrate better at school.

He was never afraid to let go of me.

Observer of the Hours of the Night. Imbedded in history, I remember the group of men that gently placed the mummy into its golden sarcophagus, for I was there. Open the locket on the necklace to release the ancient trace of frankincense and myrrh. It happened near the desert the Jews wandered for forty years, I read about it in a pamphlet at my other grandma's. The obese librarian descends the staircase, grand yet simple, a Sumerian god. The sunlight fell from the two-story windows like rain. No one bought me anything at the gift shop.

Plea Bargain. They seemed to barely know him at his office. Actually, I can't remember. I can remember, but I was just so tired at the time. I was so tired, and I was worried about my job. I was about to get fired. Well, not exactly fired, but I'm not supposed to talk about it.

Private Person. He wasn't kidding or putting on a show: He wanted to die alone. He waited to die alone. He loved doing things without us, like watching football or reading a book.

Quincunx. Concordance, catena, concatenation. Catena, cantina, cabana. The deep dawn of the at-sea themed restaurant in Sarasota, the walls trashed with anchors, patrons at every table. We put shreds of paper on our bulletin boards to remind ourselves, but I cannot read them now.

The Rites of May. High school maidens kissed boys underneath the bleachers where an audience took in the yearly presentation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I covered my eyes when the donkey came out. The weather always cooperated. The scent of hamburgers decorated the air, sweeter than perfume made from ravished plants. The quotidian courtyard deepened and improved. I believed in the pagan universe, little bits of things scattered throughout the earth, one after another after another. I believed I was a part of it.

The Stein Building. There was something on the top shelf of the closet in the entryway of our apartment that I was always trying to get. I think it was a self-help book for kids about how to stop sucking your thumb.

Sunny. Sitting “Indian-Style” in the field behind the gym as she explained the rules for hours, I perused the faces and bodies of the kids in my immediate vicinity: the reddish, rug-burned-looking skin on their cheeks, their limbs disorganized, like shirts and pants strewn on the floor. They seemed totally unaware of my examinations, as if it had never crossed their minds that someone would judge them.

Suddenly they sprang up, like the TV accidentally turning off.

I didn’t know what team I was on, or where I was supposed to stand. A fence topped with rusty stakes, more than two kids tall, contained us. On the other side, people walked toward the University with purpose and speed. By the time I got to be their age, it wouldn’t matter anymore. The me who wanted to leave so badly would be gone. I’d be a stranger, kissing men and carrying a purse. My long, thin body wouldn’t be able to guess what was best for me, the real me, imbedded in childhood, looking out my bedroom window all night long, *observer of the hours of the night.*

The ball kept rolling around. “Lucy!” Some boys came over and had me switch places with another girl. *She’s even worse than...*

I turned red and tried not to cry. I felt a lump in my throat, like the young ballerina when she became an orphan on the very first page.

Tahiti, IL. I sat on the motorcycle at the edge of the exhibit slyly, because it seemed like a place you weren't supposed to go. That made it worthwhile. The layer of shellac on the motorcycle, pinning it down forever, was very light. Year in, year out, there was a sense of a typhoon about to hit land.

Talk of the Town. Magazines, newspapers in wicker baskets. I carefully cut out pictures of animals. "Lucy, this is *The New Yorker*! There was an article that went across the backs of all these pages, and now Daddy and I can't read it!"

There Where It Is. The elements on the periodic table, each letter of my name, came unglued every Sunday. I yelled at her, screamed at her to put the pieces back where they belonged. She didn't know what I meant, but I think she knew a little bit. She made me and made me and made me and words can't explain it. When it ended, I was always a little less than I had been. "I have no language left at all; the world is not 'unreal' …, but disreal: reality has fled from it, is nowhere, so that I no longer have any meaning (any paradigm) available to me" (Barthes, *Lover's* 89).

Turgenev, Gogol, Solzhenitsyn. My brothers and I were ripping each other apart upstairs where our bedrooms were. I can't remember if it was day or night. I can't remember what decade it was. Daddy broke it up and read aloud from a relevant passage of a book. I sat against the wall, under a mirror. He turned pages many times. I didn't even consider listening. It was Russian Literature. On the couch, my brothers were sweating with boredom. Mommy was looking at him with her soft, sweet, sticky love. I followed her gaze to his face, his three-dimensional eyebrows like shelves, his nose a perfect triangle. I

always assumed that one day I would have a family of my own. I knew I would, like how I knew I'd have a different body when I really became me.

Unpopular. There was no one I could think to want to be like.

Vegetarian. I stood in the entryway of the apartment.

I stood in the foyer of our house.

I stood in the hallway of our townhouse.

I stood in the entryway of the apartment in the Stein Building and bit into a sausage. I gagged and I knew I would throw up soon.

I was homesick, though I was home.

I stood in the entryway of the apartment in the Stein Building. I bit into the sausage and I knew I would never eat meat again. I bit into something white and felt exhausted.

I stood in the foyer of our house and I knew I wasn't supposed to be here. I was in the wrong century, the wrong continuum, the wrong structure of signs.

I stood in the entryway of the apartment and I decided I would never eat meat again, never, I swore it and made it so.

When I went to college, I learned you could just say you're a vegetarian,

simple.

Want. “Child in the thick of yearning.” (Susan Wheeler, “The Green Stamp Book”). I *wanted* so badly I was “in the thick of” it, in the state of it, as if in sleep.

Hated the museum, loved the gift shop.
Hated the library, loved the book store.

“You only want to go where you can get a present or a treat,” Daddy said.

“So?” I said.

Weather Report. You could see school from the window. It was gray and droopy as a gargoyle. She walked me to the end of the block and let me walk the rest of the way alone. That’s how little girls get injured, but I made it through the year.

Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been. Under the viaduct there was a mural that was both meticulous and poorly painted, about people who took the train. Above their raggedy bodies, they told their life stories in capital letters in enormous speech balloons. *My aunt worked as a dressmaker in Mississippi...*

The Wrong Time and Place. Sometimes on Sunday nights I slip out of the *I* in me, and then I know I did bad things before I began. Whatever happens, I’ve felt it before. I was there in a black cape or something, in the back of a truck waiting, buried and/or unearthed.

You, Too. I was standing outside after dinner wearing a turquoise “Minnesota” t-shirt with a duck on it. It was long and big, so I wore it as a dress. I ran around the little park with a few other kids. And then I felt something wet and heavy hit my head. I didn’t want to know what had happened. I ran to her—she was sitting on a bench with some other moms. When she saw me, she smiled and took me, carefully, by the shoulders. “Okay, *careful*...” she said. I put my hand to my hair and smeared some of the bird shit onto her.

“Lucy! *Why did you do that?* Now we’re *both* covered in bird poop.”

“I don’t know!” I wept. “I didn’t want to be alone.”

X. I held up the line at sign-in every morning. I couldn't *conceive* the diagonal lines with which to draw an "X" beside my name. I reached for them every morning, expecting to find them there. +, I wrote. + a hundred times. A hundred more. Sometimes I turned the sheet and wrote my + across the slanted page. Easier to turn the entire world on the diagonal than to change the way I was, screwed tight to myself and my secrets.

Zanzibar. Night ride with blanky. You can get there in car. Zooming down the Drive like the pictures of lights riding the sky that she showed us how to take. Dead Man's Curve. Dusk, dusk, the kidnapping time. Her Diet Rite rattled in the cup holder. I thought it meant she was drinking and driving. Talking from the radio perfumed my headaches. It was worse when I put my head down. It was worse when I sat up. It was worse when I rolled down the window. It was worse when I sat in the back. It was worse when I sat in the front.

Every Ship Is A Romantic Object, Except That We Sail In. Embark, and the Romance Quits Our Vessel, and Hangs on Every Sail in the Horizon.

Busy horizon—

On this open open sea—

How many times I've fallen for—

My private business—

And I sailed alongside you still—

Disembark—

Tap another vessel—

Gaze out our scuttles—

Lipstick in your eyes—

Please—Don't—

Peg the ship—Me—

The Ballad of Sexual Dependency

There was a great photography teacher at the middle and high school I attended. She was large and serious facing the class, but I heard she was the president of the National Roller Coaster Riders Club. It must have been true. I was so unpopular that no news that dribbled down to me was gossip-y or unconfirmed; any item to reach my ears might as well have been in the *Chicago Tribune*.

Everything was hard and boring. It was always overcast late afternoon, even in the morning. The science teacher, who had two separate and distinct doctorates from Princeton, wrote the test scores on the chalkboard, so that we could see how we had done compared to everyone else, and my score was always the lowest. I couldn't even figure out how to play Drug Wars on my graphing calculator. I can still taste misery of that time, slick and sour, like a rotten tooth.

The slides she showed us rattled me. Dianne Arbus, Larry Clark, Cindy Sherman, Nan Goldin. The Arbus photographs I could endure. I didn't like what I saw in those freaks' faces, but Arbus riffed on portraiture in a way that felt familiar enough. Goldin's work, however, sent me into a tailspin of despair. The photographs looked like snapshots, but freighted with meaning, like the blurry images of victims during happier times on the local news. "Up next! Hyde Park girl buried alive!" (I spent long nights worrying I would be buried alive.)

Goldin chronicled her life in the 1980s New York art world, her relationship with an abusive boyfriend, her glamorous friendships, with their parties, drugs, sex, fun, and horror. In a self-portrait, she had two nasty shiners in different states of healing—and, horribly incongruous, perfect big hair and a red smear of lipstick. I put my hands over my eyes, as I had done during the matinee showing of *Jurassic Park* to which my dad had

recently taken me and my brother. My dad kept nudging me in the arm. “Watch! This part won’t be scary!” It was always a trap, and when I screamed, he would laugh his head off. I was exhausted when we got home.

The Ballad of Sexual Dependency. The title made me think of a record playing in an empty apartment. Broken, barely-awake maidens played dress-up in mirrors. Everything was decorated: As a dropped glass of milk decorates a floor, as my little brother’s crying decorated the backseat during a car trip. I hated the world that the photographs described. The photography teacher had accounted for that. “What you hate most, you will return to. Your hatred draws you to certain pieces and certain artists. You will find a way back to them.”

Her repulsive prediction was just another fear to loom over me as I lay in bed not sleeping, waiting to become thin and brave, wholly different. It sometimes seemed too bold a gamble to go outside at all. I knew that adults could get AIDS or die in a plane crash; I had seen numerous infomercials for TimeLife products that covered these subjects. I didn’t want to be ejected into that risky world where people elected to press their naked bodies together. I was nostalgic for my childhood as it was happening, those radiator-heated halls where everybody hated me.

And yet. When I went downtown with my mom to pick up a chicken to bring to my grandparents, or as I walked home from volleyball practice in the evening, my eye rose above street-level, up to where people lived in stark beauty and sin, “fists curled to desire” (Brock-Broido 10). From my bedroom window, I could see into the apartment building next door. The window closest to mine wasn’t really very close; inside its correspondent apartment, I could see only the shadow the window itself cast, changing with the available light. I hold the copyright on that sight, no matter how many times I might have passed in the street, without knowing it, who lived behind that window.

A thousand years passed. After work and on the weekends, I spent a lot of time at the library. I hardly hung out with anybody. I had a bad job and a bad apartment and the numbers of yucky men on my cellphone. On the way to a certain library desk that I considered mine, I saw the book version of Goldin's slideshow, also called *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* on a dusty bottom shelf. I exhausted the library's contemporary poetry collection before I answered its call. And it was calling me, ringing hard like the bell inside the heavy old rotary phones that sat on the front hall tables of the world in which I grew up. I was drawn to Goldin. I found a way back to her.

At the announcement that the library would be closing in 15 minutes, I emerged from the book as if from the ocean. I superstitiously didn't check it out; I was afraid to bring its power into the other parts of my life. For weeks, I spent hours a day looking at it in the library, dreaming of the obsolete but still glittering world it depicted.

"Imagine with me an Absolute Book of Unnatural Nature, fully immersive, polysensory, eloquent, in which everything is reactive, self-replicating; a mutable, complex, and functioning system with which the reader—who is now far more than a reader—may interact as she does with the real" (Ducornet 23). It spoke, in an unpronounceable language, dead as Latin, of the dream of adulthood I had as a child. Boxy taxis shooting through the night streets of Manhattan, the rumpled bedsheets of strangers. The time when my life might have been like that was over; it never was. And yet—in those photographs, I recognize the blue and yellow casts of light by which I have, somehow, changed.

I won't look up the photographs of *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* on the Internet, even for research purposes, in writing this essay, for example. On the few occasions I have seen images by Goldin shared on tumblr or Facebook, I have closed the tab. *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* is, for me, apart from all that. It is its own Internet,

a network of associations deeper and more complicated than I could understand in this lifetime.

The Ballad of Sexual Dependency

From the loss-lined set of parents smeared to
a restaurant booth, cabs drive backward. Out into

endless parties 44azzed across the disordered
Bowery. The living falls out what's been seen.
A shower doesn't make anyone clean.
Out of nail polish, tonic, aspirin, and Vaseline.
Out in the wind in a blazer, the beach deserted.

A gray metal bedpost, paint peeling, is the ballast
of the room. College postcards are pinned beside
the bed. The velvet hour, not day or night.
Everything happens in this pearl-colored light.
Like one-eyed purses are these pretty breasts.

A pattern is a pattern to get stuck in

in a European hotel room

fading into the headboard
like a bas relief

a low-slung bed in a whorehouse

a long hall paved with stripped queen mattresses
a priestly twin in hospital sheets

Standing two-dimensional against the door the done-
up stranger looks like he's lying in a coffin: Welcome.

His takes his gaze behind
the camera's eyes. He doesn't bother to trash
the evidence. He has a big gun and a bigger watch,
vaulted eyebrows and long, womanish lashes.
For each dot of stubble a separate desire.

Outside behind him looks like a poster of outside.
There are crumpled clothes in a heap
on the unmade, unmade, unmade bed. There is time to sleep.
The bed is a ruined mansion on a shut-down street.
In the red-lit room, the way he looked lied.

Creamy skeletons prepping for their entrance,
the superannuated boys go flat.
They hold each other like night sticks.

Their urine looks like shower water,
and the shower water looks like their urine.
The bulbs in the mirror

light up the drain.

I saw the one where the sun hit the road like a dropped earring.

It seems she never moved in in the first place.
Death stamped the hand of every other person at the concert,
and then it climbed on top of them like roommates in bed.

No one’s ever going to climb on top
of me like that. And when they do,

I won’t do anything.

Corrections

As she ran up to her bedroom and put on her coat and gloves, she felt sorriest about her mother, because no matter how often and how bitterly Enid had complained to her, she'd never got it through her head that life in St. Jude had turned into such a nightmare; and how could you permit yourself to breathe, let alone laugh or sleep or eat well, if you were unable to imagine how hard another person's life was? –Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*

I'm not taking the same path RE Jonathan Franzen that the rest of the world seems to be on. The idea that he would be passive aggressively contemptuous (Gay), or crudely moralizing (Sturgeon), or sexist (Raphael) doesn't fit with my experience of his writing. And my experience with his writing leads back to tearing through his first book, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, which my dad gave me to read when I was in seventh grade, and then *Strong Motion* right afterward. Both of those novels had a sweet, cartoonish feeling. I associate them with the love I had for reading, deep down, before I learned to pin it to broader cultural meanings, to words like *bookworm*, or *smart*, or *nerdy*, or *cool*.

My brother laughed at how I never knew the titles or authors of the books I read.

"What are you reading?" he asked.

"Uh...I don't know," I would say, not looking up from my book. I didn't bother to check, because the cover was the boring part. What mattered was the humming, scary, busy world inside. I had to get inside; I was *hungry* to get inside.

My mom told me, you will like being an adult much better. She was right. It doesn't matter how stupid the other kids at school thought I was, or how old I was when I finally kissed a boy. I don't miss anything about being a kid—except for how private

were the books I loved, before they could be reduced to the data on their covers: what have you read? what haven't you? in a word, what do you think of so-and-so's latest?

Jonathan Franzen, to me, is of that before-time, my early teens, along with the other books and writers I read then, like Laurie Colwin, John Grisham, Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, Laura Ingalls Wilders, *Little Women* and *Little Men*, Willa Cather, Nora Ephron's *Heartburn*, next, next, whatever my dad put in my hands. I see them across a barrier, from the other side. The separateness of childhood! Its sticky-sweet low light, all afternoon underneath a blanket fort. Why was I always so afraid, like poor, wretched David of *Call It Sleep*?

My personal associations aside, Franzen conveys the feeling of that time in *The Corrections*: childhood as it is and is remembered, like a dark river coursing beneath your adult life. *There where it was, I will be,* as Freud said. On the radio I heard Franzen say that it wasn't particularly cathartic to write *The Corrections*. Sure, the ever-suffering but ever-hopeful Enid was based on his mother. But his mother was a deep, whole person. With *another person's life*. As long as he lives, he said, he will never get to the bottom of her.

Who could get to the bottom of someone else? There are parts of a person no else can reach, even if you invented them, even if they gave birth to you. One's mother is so easy to think about, but so hard to imagine. It nearly chokes the *breath* out of you.

What threatens the nice yuppie lives of Enid's three adult children, including Denise, the "she" of this sentence, is no obvious disaster. Why would disaster be obvious, necessarily? A *nightmare* can creep up slowly; it might never be mentioned. You might not notice it until it's long past.

I like the short, direct—so direct as to seem thesis-driven—novels that Franzen has championed, like Nell Zink's *The Wallcreeper* and Paula Fox's *Desperate*

Characters, which he writes about in the essay "No End to It," in his most recent nonfiction book, *Farther Away*. In *The Wallcreeper* and *Desperate Characters*, a sense of catastrophe looms in a Puritanical, "these characters have consumed too much and now they will pay" kind of way. I can see what would appeal to Franzen about Fox's and Zink's approach, as he asks via poor Denise *how could you permit yourself to breathe*. But there is another type of novel that Franzen tends to praise, and it is those novels that I *love*, enormous, messy, insane books, like *The Man Who Loved Children*, by Christina Stead, or his friend David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. Inside those novels, you lose the thread of whatever you thought you might have come there for. Franzen's novels seem to me much closer to those big, weird books. Having read them, I do not feel I've finished them. I see again and again, in my mind's eye, the terrible dad of Stead's novel standing in the yard. The sentence sprints up the stairs and forgets what it was going to get—keys? hat and...what else? It returns with only questions.

I lied. Well, I didn't lie, but I simplified. Childhood isn't separate. It's a spiral leading down, up, away, to. I'm an adult. So why am I always running up the stairs of the house I grew up in, or crossing my feet on the coffee table in the same living room in which I learned to read? Where is the part where I stand back and change? When I get to the top of the stairs, facing my childhood bedroom, I feel so lightheaded, it is as if I've left myself behind. Paused like a tape, I don't know my own name. It used to happen to me all the time. It still does.

Learning to Live With It

Nothing touching, not the sea or sky. In the Bestiary Room at the College of Barnum and Bailey, stuffed animals posed eternal. Sam clutched his Steiff. They rode in train cars across the nation, subsisted on stage light.

At the beginning of everything the mother dies or goes away forever. I don't know the names of the countries it happens in. The words that convey it are a theater my dad fought at during war. He built me a bike in the dining room one Christmas before the decade changed. You have to turn the pages yourself. They mean too much, *oh terribly so, she said*. I keep turning them and shaking my language in bed.

A hurricane lands here every afternoon. Comes a black sky, a false night to ruin the atmosphere. When it ends everyone goes for ice cream. I smell the letters that spell the flavors. I think it says Berried Alive. In the motel room next door, a man beats a woman all night. I peruse the photos in the student newspaper through dawn. Can we please go home. Listening to Dick Bionde spin the golden oldies I am the only one who knows.

When we finally return, the street growls, our house is wearing a different face. It's happened before on other Sundays. All there is to do is wait it out. Loosed inside myself I bounce around unframed. No mind or memory, staring at a switch, a page. I have tried watching different shows or going to bed early, but this *cast of mind* follows me from room to room.

It would be better to die than to meet another Sunday, rows of books titled *Kant* in every room of my grandparents' apartment, the gray underside of salmon, room temperature skim milk in a wine glass. I used to think they were math textbooks.

Babar learned the hard way no one's safe. His consciousness pointed back toward that knowledge, a compass, a magic 8-ball, a tomb. Slipping his pain into his natty attaché case or the breast pocket of his shipshape three-piece suit. Trips to regions Tin Tin would envy. When I see him in the jungle now I look the other way.

Experimental Women Writers in the Internet Archive: Bernadette Mayer's *Memory*, Kathleen Fraser's *How(ever)*, and the Archive of the Future

"If you are a woman, archives hold perpetual ironies. Because the gaps and silences are where you find yourself."

—Susan Howe, *The Birthmark* (158)

For the whole of my life on social media, my feeds have been filled with creative writers promoting their micropress, linking to the poem just published at a new site for emerging writers, or congratulating a friend on her latest chapbook. The part of me seeking membership in these various micro-communities is the creative writer. Another part of me, the literary scholar, reader of archival studies by Libby Rifkin, Ann Vickery, and Cynthia Hogue of relatively recent, but pre-Internet, experimental poetry, stands at some distance from that marketplace. My scholarly and creative writing sides share their intel with each other. For example, scrolling through my screens or flipping pages, I am struck by how familiar is the social and cultural activity surrounding what Vickery calls "vehicles of poetic production"—i.e., small presses, literary journals, poetry readings (19).

Here I will analyze how experimentalism and indie/experimental literary aesthetics are being recorded in online archives. Rather than attempt to unravel my various roles as customer, aspirant, submitter, participant, and scholar vis-à-vis the contemporary small press marketplace, I will simply, and variously, draw from those roles as I consider what new archives of experimental women's writing suggest about how 21st-century writing and its contexts will be archived. I have chosen experimental women's writing as an exemplary archive for this paper not (or at least not only) because I am an experimental woman writer, but because I have noticed imbedded in some of these texts ambivalent arguments about their own archivability. Many of these textual arguments predate the Internet but speak presciently to current conversations about defining authorship and self in the age of social media. An example of such a work is *Memory*, by Bernadette Mayer, who is sometimes associated with the Language Poets. A multi-genre project that has been published in various formats, *Memory* is indicative of why Mayer is so difficult to categorize artistically and generically. Conceived as a performance piece for which Mayer attempted to record, via photographs, notes, and audiotapes, everything she experienced during July 1971, *Memory* was presented as an installation in a Manhattan gallery in 1972, then published in book form in 1975 by North Atlantic Books (Kotz). Now, a digital version of the book is available at the University of Utah *Eclipse* archive. The book version of *Memory* includes text from the project but—aside from a few photographs reproduced on the book's front and back cover—no other media. The steady de-emphasizing of the artistic modes of *Memory* across its publication formats coincides with Mayer's movement away from conceptual art and toward conceptual writing. The variety of presentations of the piece, and the differences across those presentations, testify to the contradictory nature of a work that draws meaning from both its temporal uniqueness and its reproductions.

Mayer's use of scientific discourse in and around the project underscores the collision between personal subjectivity and the effort to create an objective record. Mayer has called *Memory* an "emotional science project," a phrase that combines the discourses of high art and high *school*, suggesting an intervention of female subjectivity in the objective, and traditionally male-dominated, realm of science (qtd. in Vickery 151). However, *Memory* was also, Mayer has said, an "unrepeatable work" (qtd. in Baker). Her description underscores the performative, as opposed to scientific, nature of the work, given that an actual scientific experiment is, by definition, repeatable. Mayer draws on scientific imagery in the text of *Memory*, as well; in the July 3 entry, she writes, "i'm working more the way strudents in science are working in a lab" (24). Mayer's misspelling of "students" evinces the automatic-writing style construction of the text. Moments of what could be called "human error" throughout *Memory* are reminders of Mayer's "science"; rather than self-correcting, she lets the record, and the moment, stand.

The appearances of *Memory* in a variety of published forms over the years lend irony to Mayer's description of the project as "unrepeatable." However, that irony is imbedded in the text, as well, in Mayer's suggestion that even as these experiences were being lived, they were felt doubled, replayed. *Memory*'s entry for July 20 begins, "Double exposures, live memory" (117). The two clauses in this sentence offer the suggestion that, as experience is recorded "live," it doubles, cleaving into lived experience and projected memory. The phrase "double exposure" evokes the photographic element of *Memory*, as well as suggesting Mayer's vulnerability in this personally revealing project. With *Memory*, Mayer said, "I was never trying to take beautiful photographs. I was trying to take as many as possible" (Lecture). *Memory* seems directly anticipatory of what many of us do every day in the age of social media, recording everything we experience. Her intentions are simultaneously personally and

publically archival, like the "personal history reminder" Facebook app *On This Day*, which tells you—and your followers, of course—what you were doing at this time last year.

The *Eclipse* version elides the photographic and other multi-media aspects of *Memory*; they are no longer available (Kotz).[1] It seems, however, that the deconstructions of self and traditional notions of authorship in *Memory* depended on its mixed media and gallery layout. Liz Kotz writes of the gallery presentation that "its authorship is distributed among various functions that don't necessarily cohere into a single self." Vickery writes that "the gallery emphasized memory as existing through a shared social space" (152). Among the elements of *Memory* that make it so relevant to contemporary conversations about subjectivity and authorship on the Internet are its multi-media format and its narrative disruption across physical space. These aspects of *Memory*, ironically, are absent from its most recent and most accessible publication, online at the *Eclipse* archive. David Lau lists *Eclipse* among the slickly curated online archives of avant garde work (others include Kenneth Goldsmith's *Ubu Web*, and University of Pennsylvania's *PennSound*) that, he argues, strip texts of "their historical particularity, their concrete, orchestrated determinations (and actual distance from us) in journal, books, pamphlet, performance, talk, or reading. Rooted in academic or para-academic contexts, these new digital archives, richly backward looking, seem distinct from the avant-garde dream of the transformation of daily existence on every imaginable scale" (n.p.). Although working in the archive has been associated with historicizing, Lau's argument underscores how this association is ruptured with the Internet archive. In the *Eclipse* presentation of *Memory*, the convenience, beauty, and historical decontextualizing aspects of the Internet avant garde archive are all in evidence. *Memory*'s literal intention

[1] "The original 35mm slides are held in Mayer's papers at the University of California San Diego, and there are also a handful of installation photographs, although unfortunately these are not very detailed" (Kotz).

of transforming "daily existence" through transcribing it across media makes it a fascinating text with which to consider Lau's argument. Unfortunately, for visitors to the *Eclipse* site, that intention is difficult to discern, as the text appears without information about its particular history.

I will briefly discuss another Internet archive of experimental women's writing that forefronts some of the ambiguous capacities of the online archive, before posing questions about how contemporary writing might be archived online. Kathleen Fraser's feminist journal *HOW(ever)* ran from 1983 to 1992, and helped establish a generation of experimental writers, including Beverly Dahlen, Myung Mi Kim, and Fraser. A simple, Xeroxed collection of typewritten pages on plain white 8-½ x 11 paper, *HOW(ever)* was ostentatiously plain, denoting its seriousness of purpose. Several years after ending *HOW(ever)*, Fraser founded *HOW2* online, continuing conversations that *HOW(ever)* had fostered. *HOW2* was a busier, more bustling space than *HOW(ever)*, with more images, features, and contributors in each issue. Now, *HOW(ever)* and *HOW2* are archived together, sharing an online space through Arizona State University's Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing. Although Lau does not list this archive among his "new digital archives" "rooted in academic or para-academic contexts," the *HOW2* and *HOW(ever)* archive meets his criteria.

The final issues of *HOW2* and *HOW(ever)*, as archived online, highlight some of the fundamental distinctions between the online archiving of physical and online texts. The last issue of *HOW(ever)* is in some ways a standard issue of the journal, with regular features like poetry and "working notes" from experimental women writers and an editor's note alerting readers to new feminist publications; however, the "postcards" section of the issue, typically a space for dispatches and reviews, contains statements about the publication from current and former editors. In this space, Fraser, Rachel Blau

du Plessis, Dahlen, and others strike notes ranging from irritated to proud, comic to elegiac. “I see the fruits of [this] experiment in many places now. But still, I am sorry that its time is up,” writes du Plessis (n.p.).

The final issue of *HOW2*, conversely, is not necessarily final at all. Nearly a decade since that issue, one wonders if perhaps the publication is simply on hold. In addition to the use of the word “archive” to describe the collection of *HOW2* issues, there are other mixed signals about whether the journal is still operating, like the dating of the archives “March, 1999-Spring, 2004,” and a conflicting description, “From 1999 to the present day, the online publication How2 has been continuing HOW(ever)’s original spirit of inquiry...” The onward march of “the present day” seems almost cruelly swift here: On the Internet, “Spring 2004” seems completely unrelated to “the present day.” Meanwhile, there *are* more-recent issues than Spring 2004 in this archive: the newest issue of *HOW2* available here is from Summer 2008. From this page, clicking on “current issue” takes readers to a Fall 2008 issue, with features about Caroline Bergvall, Carla Harryman, and new media. Nothing about the issue suggests an intention to halt publication, but the most recently updated site related to *HOW2* is a 2010 blogpost.

Comparing the two publications in 2000, when *HOW2* was still going strong, Vickery writes,

> Like *HOW(ever)*, *HOW2* is in a form that challenges the current print culture. As an electronic journal, it invites multiple, nonlinear reading strategies. There is also greater accessibility, as readers from around the Western world can return again and again to old and current issues... This, in turn, promises a greater range of innovative poetries and concerns being debated on the *HOW2* site. (100)

The challenge *HOW2* presented to print culture 15 years ago is now more strongly conveyed in its individual pieces than in the publication itself, which feels frozen in time,

as opposed to deliberately archived. In their current, shared online space, the archive of *HOW(ever)* feels more deliberate than the archive of *HOW2*. That distinction comes to the fore regarding these two journals because the *HOW2* and *HOW(ever)* share an archival space. However, the same could be said of a variety of online sites, like blogs once frequently updated, now abandoned: They self-archive, and loudly if unintentionally announce their own dissolutions.

*

I will draw on some of the contradictions present in online archives of recent experimental writing in the final part of this paper, which stems from my observations about how popular printed matter is among experimental writers online. The two contemporary one-woman presses I will discuss, Dorothy, a publishing project and dancing girl press, promote their works and authors almost exclusively online, as is typical for small presses, but also focus almost entirely on the production of printed materials.

I choose these two presses for several reasons. First, like Mayer and Fraser, Danielle Dutton, the publisher of Dorothy, and Kristy Bowen, the publisher of dancing girl, are experimental writers themselves. Second, they publish exclusively women writers.[1] Third, although founded during the Internet age, post-2000, both presses focus on producing print books. They are also, as I will explain, unusually well-established in the world of micro-presses. In concluding, I will pose questions about how such presses, with their enforcement of distinct feminist and material boundaries, might be remembered in online archives.

[1] Dorothy's stated policy is to publish books "mostly by women." The twelve books published thus far have been woman-authored. Dancing girl publishes manuscripts exclusively by "woman poets."

I considered emailing Dutton and Bowen to solicit their opinions about the contemporary publishing landscape, and I did end up sending Dutton a couple minor questions, but it is probably worth noting that it did not seem necessary, given the many long, detailed interviews of both writer-publishers online. The presence and availability of this content speaks to two questions I have about archiving contemporary experimental writing online. One, who will archive this online content (and why)? Two, why is print production valued so highly in the indie/experimental online market place? Dorothy and dancing girl, from their names to their websites, offer a handmade aesthetic that seems particularly appealing online, where impersonality is often the default setting. In interviews, Dutton is asked much more frequently about her policy of printing physical books than her policy of publishing only books by women. In an interview in *Bomb Magazine*, Dutton says, "It's essential to me that Dorothy books be lovely to look at and hold" (n.p.). In an interview on the *Paris Review* blog, the interviewer tells Dutton, "Your books are so appealing as physical objects—small and pleasingly designed" (n.p.).

Bowen is asked often about the book as physical object, as well. "I think as publishing moves further and further away from paper and the handmade-ness of books and book objects, the more I move toward them," she says in an interview. "I feel like the rise of the internet actually has SAVED chapbook presses, making them easier to sell, easier to market, easier to distribute than they have ever been before." Bowen has what I think of as a chapbook empire. In the interest of full disclosure, one of my poetry chapbooks was published through this press. Having a dancing girl press chapbook is almost a rite of passage for emerging women poets of a certain type of experimental aesthetic; since founding the press in 2004, Bowen has published more than 300 chapbooks. Dancing girl press chapbooks, like Dorothy books, have a "look"—size, shape, and cover art to which they tend to conform. Dorothy books are small, nearly

square, and brightly colored, while dancing girl chapbooks are slim, rectangular, hand-stapled, softly colored. But one of my favorite dancing girl books deviates completely from that norm. “Fascicle,” by the poet Rebecca Dunham, is a series of cards, printed with poems and images from Emily Dickinson’s herb garden, which fit neatly into a small cardboard box. Reading this deconstructed chapbook, I thought of how Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” was originally published as a loose pamphlet, in a special issue of the journal *Aspen*, the “magazine in a box.” As Barthes’s essay has become cliché in academic and nonacademic circles, the conceptual, experimental, and artistic circumstances of its original publication generally have been forgotten. Now, for better, worse, or both, the issue of *Aspen* in which it appeared is available, for free, on the *Ubu Web* online archive.

CHAPTER 2:

THE CAPTIVITY AND RESTORATION OF MRS. MARY ROWLANDSON

Genre, Form, Captivity, and Restoration

At the end of the twentieth-century, Sherman Alexie, Louise Erdrich, and Susan Howe creatively reimagined Mary Rowlandson's seventeenth-century captivity narrative, to much scholarly interest (see, for example, Ben-Zvi, Dimock, Nicholls). Alexie's lyric essay "Captivity" riffs off Erdrich's poem of the same name; both Alexie's and Erdrich's creative pieces serve critical functions, too, as they point out the limited perspective of Rowlandson's narrative, including its racist depictions of her Indian captors. Howe's lyric essay on Mary Rowlandson, "The Captivity and Restoration of Mary Rowlandson," expands on the sections of Howe's earlier text, *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), that discuss Rowlandson. "I think Rowlandson is the mother of us all," Howe says in an interview included in *The Birth-mark* (1993), the book of essays in which the Rowlandson piece appears (167). Why are these creative writers interested in Rowlandson's captivity narrative, with the tercentenary of its first publication in the rear-view? Why am I?

"Make America Great Again," say Donald Trump-themed baseball hats as I write this. Keyword: again. Oh, the past. The *pastness* of the past, sitting at the dinner table as a family, an appropriate amount of personal identity and opportunity portioned out like mashed potatoes, like *whirled peas*, as the bumper stickers of my youth said. "Make America Great Again," wrote Cotton Mather in "The Wonders of the Invisible World." It was 1693. At the dawn of the idea of America, it was already ruined. Rowlandson is nostalgic, too. I used to sleep well, back before my captivity, she writes. Now I stay awake, me and my lost innocence together through the night.

In their writing of her, around her, with regard to her, Alexie, Erdrich, and Howe make scant reference to the form in which Rowlandson chooses to tell her captivity narrative. But what a form! Hers was the first Indian captivity narrative published in

North America. Back before the established American anything—novel, essay, tale—she invented a way. Born in England, alive in the New World. Without mold or model, she began.

Wai Chee Dimock writes of the "back-and-forth networks" of race, region, and time that are suggested by Alexie's lyric essay and Erdrich's poem about Rowlandson: Erdrich and Alexie indicate "that there is more than one story here," other routes to take than the one that Rowlandson selected (121, 118). However, I believe that Rowlandson's formal choices, if not her word choices, suggest a similar sense of "multinode connection" (Dimock 118). Rowlandson displaces her reader as she herself was displaced by building a variety of nests called "removes," like her captors did for her. Like Alexie, Erdrich, and Howe, or like the scholars who who have written academic essays about her, Rowlandson asserts her ideology through form. Despite the formally inventive ways that Alexie, Erdrich, and Howe depict and revise Mary Rowlandson, none focus on Rowlandson as a writer or, to use Foucault's phrase, author function. As a writer, as the shaper of a heavily shaped text, an innovatively formed intertextual work shot through with Biblical references, as a builder of "removes," as an author, curated and framed, Rowlandson is virtually absent for these creative writers.

Alexie's "Captivity," for instance, is a set of fourteen numbered prose chunks, a form that could be a reference to the twenty numbered sections of Rowlandson's original, labeled "First Remove," "Second Remove," all the way to "Twentieth Remove"—or not. It seems to me that it is Rowlandson's message across the centuries, as opposed to the conditions of her authorship, that Alexie engages in his lyric essay. Yael Ben-Zvi reads Alexie's form as a sonnet in prose, rendered in narrative "to disrupt its formal constraints" (24). As a disruption, Alexie's piece could be in line with and at odds with Rowlandson's. In one sense, Alexie's essay mounts profound arguments against

Rowlandson's Eurocentric world view, and his disrupted sonnet speaks to those arguments. As we meet Alexie's Rowlandson, she "is still running, waving her arms wildly at real and imagined enemies" (98). Formally, however, Alexie and Rowlandson share tactics. Both writers build houses in some type of wilderness—emotional, ecological—out of weird bricks of prose.

In place of Rowlandson's intertextual Biblical references, interspersed throughout the text to lend Christian backup to her tale, Alexie utters, in all caps, "the language of the enemy": The landscape of Alexie's text is littered with signs asserting, HANDICAPPED PARKING ONLY, WET CEMENT, SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED (99-101). Where Rowlandson's world is typologized by Biblical signs, and so she sees the Bible everywhere, in everything she does, so Alexie's is typologized by the U.S. Government, which knows, as well as any body, how to do things with words. "How do you know whether to use the IN or OUT door to escape?" Alexie asks in the final section, suggesting how the signs by which his world is marked hold him captive (101).

Dimock argues that Alexie's depictions of Rowlandson speak to what Rowlandson seemed unable to say, perhaps because of the generic constraints of the captivity narrative. But Rowlandson doesn't seem all that constrained to me. Rowlandson's narrative is *confessional*, as was the Puritan way: Their God listened close for their secrets. At the beginning of Rowlandson's narrative, she writes,

> I had often before this said, that if the *Indians* should come, I should chuse rather to be killed by them than taken alive; but when it came to the trial my mind changed; their glittering Weapons so daunted my Spirit, that I chose rather to go along with those (as I may say) ravenous Bears, than that moment to end my daies. (n.p.)

Before, when it was all talk, I said I would die before be held captive. But when they came to kill me, I saw their knives and I was not brave. In Erdrich's poem, "Captivity," such disclosures return as silences. The free verse persona poem depicts Rowlandson's xenophobia, racism, confused desire, and her sleeplessness on returning to the Puritan world she had known before being taken captive. Erdrich writes, "I told myself that I would starve / before I took food from his hands / but I did not starve" (10). Erdrich creates a strong suggestion, built on throughout "Captivity" but never explicitly stated, of a love affair between Rowlandson and a central "he," a leader of the group that has taken Erdrich's Rowlandson captive.

Certain moments that feel confessional in Rowlandson's *Narrative* are rewritten, in Erdrich's "Captivity," to suggest that pieces of information have been censored. Erdrich's stanza that begins with the echo of Rowlandson's "I had often before this said…" continues with sensual description of the group's leader feeding Rowlandson. The stanza's abrupt completion implies that this speaker/author has decided to leave the rest of the scene off the record. The ensuing stanza begins, "After that the birds mocked." Rather than fill in the details of what Rowlandson might have left out, Erdrich chooses to dramatically amp up the sense that the *real narrative* has been suppressed. It may well be that, as Dimock suggests, the captivity narrative genre comes with constraints that work against truth-telling, and that, as Erdrich suggests, a reality exists that is more real than what Rowlandson titled her "True History." But it is not as if we disclose the whole truth, now that we live in the present.

Dimock's point that Rowlandson's content was constricted by the conventions of her genre underscores Rowlandson's authorship, her authorial choices. It is interesting to note that Rowlandson appears across Alexie's lyric essay in many different personae: as a student, a lover, a pioneer wife, but not as an author. In fact, part of the work of the essay

is detaching Rowlandson from the specific contexts of her authorship. In the essay's first section, Alexie introduces Rowlandson as "the white girl with no name or a name which refuses memory" (98). The second part of the essay describes a car crash: "The only survivor was a white woman from Springdale who couldn't remember her name." Alexie's essay, as Dimock puts it, "taunts" Rowlandson (115). Rowlandson the author imposes form on the disordered event of her captivity by numbering and describing each remove she was taken from home; Alexie removes Rowlandson from her own narrative by unsetting the details of time, place, and even name by which Rowlandson is known.

Here is Alexie displacing time: "Was it 1676 or 1976 or 1776 or yesterday when the Indian held you tight in his dark arms and promised you nothing but the sound of his voice?" (99). As Ben-Zvi writes, these "jumbled, mock centennials" cut against

> the ostensibly progressive course of national history from King Philip's War (1676) through the US Declaration of Independence (1776) and the US Centennial and Battle of Little Bighorn (1876) to the US Bicentennial (1976). (38)

Alexie uses form, as well, to resist that received sense of onward progression. One of the ways he does is by using a phrase from the final clause of the previous numbered section to begin the next section. For instance, the twelfth section of "Captivity" ends,

> June, Mary Rowlandson, the water is gone and my cousins are eating Lysol sandwiches. They don't need you, will never search for you in the ash after your house has burned to the ground one more time. It's over. That's all you can depend on. (100)

The thirteenth section begins, "All we can depend on are the slowmotion replays of our lives" (100). Through this repetition-by-alteration, Alexie suggests a moving forward that feels like moving back, or like not really moving forward at all.

Alexie's piece shares both a title, and an epigraph, with Louise Erdrich's poem about Rowlandson.

> He (my captor) gave me a bisquit, which I put in my pocket, and not daring to look at it, buried it under a log, fearing he had put something in it to make me love him.
>
> - From the narrative of the captivity of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, who was taken prisoner by the Wampanoag when Lancaster, Massachusetts, was destroyed, in the year 1676. (Erdrich 9)

In Alexie's version, the spelling is changed to "biscuit," underscoring the sense that historical accuracy is not the goal here. As Ben-Zvi notes, the epigraph is not from Rowlandson's text but from a later captivity narrative, John Gyles's *Memoirs of Odd Adventures, Strange Deliverances, etc.* (1736). Alexie's epigraph, from its implied reference (along with his title) to Erdrich's poem, to its updated spelling of "biscuit," works to establish further formal distance from Rowlandson the author.

However, as the poststructuralists tell us, the author wasn't really there in the first place. Rowlandson's narrative was upset immediately, by being published under different titles in America and in England. The title of the narrative as it was published in America in 1682 was:

The Soveraignty and Goodness of God, Together with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed; Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson. Commended by her, to all that desires to know the Lords doings to, and dealings with Her. Especially to her dear Children and Relations.

Written by Her own Hand for Her private Use, and now made Publick at the earnest Desire of some Friends, and for the benefit of the Afflicted.

And in England, same year:

A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, A Minister's Wife in New-England. Wherein is set forth, the Cruel and Inhuman Usage she underwent amongst the Heathens, for Eleven Weeks time: and her Deliverance from them.

Written by her own Hand, for her Private Use: And now made publick at the earnest Desire of some Friends, for the Benefit of the Afflicted.

Scholars including Gary Ebersole and Teresa Toulouse have written about how these two different titles indicate the different concerns of their audiences; Toulouse's reading of the word "Soveraignty" in the American version suggests contemporaneous debates over how New England would be governed and by whom. No matter what the title, each edition of the text retains Rowlandson's unique formal device, those twenty removes, with one chunk of prose for each movement *further away* Rowlandson is taken by her Indian captors.

The First Remove.

Now away we must go with those barbarous creatures... (n.p.)

The fourteenth through nineteenth removes have the group "bending our course" backward toward where they came (n.p.). Thus Rowlandson's removes come, even more explicitly, to represent not spatial distance, but cultural, psychic, social. Perhaps most important, these removes are spiritual. As Ebersole shows, Rowlandson's intended audience would have associated this word with the notion that "God's affection had been removed or withdrawn"; the text, then, is a terrifying descent into possible damnation: "The growing sense of distance—both spatial and spiritual—the captive had experience

with each successive remove would also have been felt by the reader through the act of reading" (Ebersole 21). Rowlandson's—and her reader's—journey is textual, passage to passage, however far away she really is.

If Rowlandson's *Narrative* were published for the first time today, it might be termed, like Alexie's piece, a lyric essay. With its dual confessional and scriptural impulses and its frequent use of literary quotations, Rowlandson's *Narrative* reminds me a bit of the poet Mary Karr's memoirs, like *Cherry* and *Lit*, which sing Rowlandson's tune: *I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see*. Lia Purpura, a contemporary innovator of the essay, notes that "the lyric essay may be, most essentially [,] an epistolary form" (98). Rowlandson's captivity narrative is a text directed *to*: Even within the space of its title, it seeks to prove *to you*, "*the Afflicted*," God's power. It grabs you by the collar—*Dear Reader, Change and Believe*.

> Before I knew what affliction meant, I was ready sometimes to wish for it. When I lived in prosperity, having the comforts of the world about me, my relations by me, heart cheerful, and taking little care for anything, and yet seeing many, whom I preferred before myself, under many trials and afflictions, in sickness, weakness, poverty, losses, crosses, and cares of the world, I should have my portion in this life, and that Scripture would come to my mind, "For whom the Lord loveth he chaseteneth, and scourgeth every Son whom he receiveth" (Hebrews 12.6). But now I see the Lord had His time to scourge and chasten me. (n.p.)

Rowlandson quotes, confesses, regrets, remembers, revises. *But now (alas) I see*.

In her lyric essay about Rowlandson, Howe makes Rowlandson's form, those removes, seem familiar: "the narrative is divided into chapters called Removes," Howe writes (96). As a formal experimentalist herself, Howe is surprisingly uninterested in Rowlandson's inventiveness.

I don't want to flatten those removes by conceiving of them as, simply, chapters.

"This is a crime story," Howe writes (124). "This is a crime story in a large and violent place. Too large for subject and object. Only a few of her captors have names. Nearly all of their names are wrong. Anyway, by 1676 most of them are gone" (125). Without explicitly saying it, Howe suggests here that the *crime* in the crime story is not Rowlandson being held captive, but the "large and violent" American imperial ideology in which Rowlandson is an active and valuable participant—a system that has, by 1676, already gone a long way toward wiping out Indian land, lives, and ways of life. This is a crime story, Howe writes, "beyond the protective reduplication of Western culture," perhaps suggesting a motive for the crime (124). But I cannot help thinking that Howe's ability to place that familiar generic label on Rowlandson's narrative—"crime story"—feels like proof of the *opposite*. That is, Rowlandson's ability to sell what happened in that wilderness as a captivity narrative, or Howe's take on it as a crime story, seem to me evidence that Western culture is capable of reduplicating itself there—even, or perhaps with particular relish, in that large and violent place. If we know where it would have been shelved at Blockbuster Video, is it really beyond the grabby Octopus arms of Western culture?

By removing the text's received generic label, captivity narrative, and replacing it with the label of crime story, Howe underlines her own text's focus on the violence and mystery of Rowlandson's tale. But neither of these labels speak to the *form* of Rowlandson's text, those removes.

Howe uses Anne Bradstreet as a counterpoint to Rowlandson; Howe's Rowlandson has been stricken, marked; she is "narrating something about the recalcitrant beast in Every-woman," in contradistinction to Bradstreet's "polished pious verse" (125, 95). But in depicting Rowlandson as beyond the reach of form, while Bradstreet stayed in

safe Puritan society and maintained form, Howe ignores what, for me, is most salient about American forms. Captive or not, Rowlandson and Bradstreet stood (read, wrote, and sewed) on shaky ground. American forms are necessarily malleable. America wouldn't *work* if they weren't. It's the Coke bottle washing to shore in *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, which I haven't even seen. It's the pic shared on Facebook of children in an impoverished Guatemalan village wearing t-shirts celebrating the victory of the team that lost the World Series, which were printed just in case, probably by the thousands. As Homi Bhabha shows in "Signs Taken for Wonders," that "traumatic scenario of colonial difference" that Rowlandson experiences and struggles to write and unwrite is not some freaky exception to the rule (1171). It *is* the rule, the way the whole thing operates. Bradstreet, like Rowlandson born in England and removed to America, traffics in form in a way that reminds me of Rowlandson. Both writers are epistolary, hyperaware of their audiences. The titles of Rowlandson's text (both in America and England) and many of Bradstreet's poem titles ("The Author to Her Book" or "To My Dear and Loving Husband") tell us, I wrote this for my "private use," for my children, my family—I'm no author! And the texts of both writers are administered by other hands, jammed with authorizing introductions by notable men. Rather than being exterior to the actual authorship of those writers, or to the forms of their pieces, I see it as central. Paratexts by others, like their constant awareness of their intended audience, are defining features of their authorships.

In each of these pieces about Rowlandson by contemporary creative writers, which I appreciate for their artistry and their attention to what Rowlandson missed and misunderstood, I end up missing the original Rowlandson, amalgam of publishers and pushers she was.

Howe's essay concludes with the line, "Mary Rowlandson saw what she did not see said what she did not say" (128). Writing about Alexie and Erdrich's poems, Dimock poses questions about Rowlandson that feel in a similar vein to Howe's concluding lyric:

> Having gone so far in the direction of sociality with her captors, what else might she have told us? Is her narrative an exhaustive record of everything that transpired, or are there things not admitted to, because not compatible with the conventions of the genre? (117)

Perhaps the word "remove" itself, repeated as a heading twenty times throughout Rowlandson's captivity narrative, in addition to indicating the path that the narrative and Rowlandson's body travel, hints at the idea that Rowlandson has removed certain things. As Howe writes, "Someone is here. Now away she must go. Invisible to her people. Out in a gap in the shadows" (95).

The sense of erasure that attaches to Rowlandson in these three writers' reimaginings of her is associated with Rowlandson's inability to sleep on return from her captivity. Rowlandson writes, toward the conclusion of the narrative,

> I can remember the time, when I used to sleep quietly without workings in my thoughts, whole nights together, but now it is otherwise with me. When all are fast about me, and no eye open but His who ever waketh, my thoughts are upon things past, upon the awful dispensations of the Lord towards us, … I remember in the night season, how the other day I was in the midst of thousands of enemies, and nothing but death before me; it was then hard work to persuade myself that I ever should be satisfied with bread again. But now we are fed with the finest of the Wheat, and (as I may so say) with honey out of the rock; instead of the husks, we have the fatted Calf; the thoughts of these things in the particulars of them, and of the love and goodness of God towards us, make it true of me, what *David*

> said of himself, *Psal*. vi. 6, *I water my couch with my tears*. Oh the wonderful power of God that mine eyes have seen, affording matter enough for my thoughts to run in, that when others are sleeping mine eyes are weeping. (n.p.)

"What is it that keeps her awake?" Dimock asks, pinpointing the passage above as an indication "that less-than-full disclosure seems to be an important compositional principle here" (117). But Rowlandson tells us that thoughts of God's "wonderful power" keeps her awake. What else is *available* to her to tell us? She has been witness to the most terrible misery and the most terrible joy that He has to offer, and it runs ceaselessly through her brain. It's not like she can meet with a psychotherapist and work out what happened. She can't get up and take an Ativan, or watch "Master of None" and read on her kindle.

We don't share Rowlandson's typological way of making sense of the world, and so it looks insane, or childishly closed off. As Howe writes, "Each time an errant perception skids loose, she controls her lapse by vehemently invoking biblical authority" (100). Reading Rowlandson in this way assumes that she knew less about herself and her world than we do about ourselves and our world. I do not see the world the way Rowlandson does, but her disclosure that she spends all night with her "thoughts upon things past" as those around her sleep deeply does not tell me anything about her self-knowledge or moral knowledge. Particularly in relation to mine, here in 2016, with all the human misery that I am able to see, on the Internet and in the news, and all that I do not lift a finger to change.

Sleeping is not one of my problems. I am able to sleep. Maybe I sleep too easily.

Four hundred years from *now*, if this shaky ground still stands for them to judge on the way we judged, let them judge us lightly.

The Captivity and Restoration of Mary Rowlandson

The one-room house she lived in would still be standing if only it hadn't been burned down three-hundred-fifty years ago. Thirty-seven people lived there and shared each other's families. They worshipped and cooked rice. Then came the Indians. First they killed her children and tore the heads off the flowers she and the other mothers had planted to please the Lord.

She thought of God's goodness and never stopped repeating.

Through the pines they took her. Their luggage rode on horseback. A mildewed rope was yoked to her wrist. She looked ahead or down. Looking back had not yet been invented.

Squatting on top of a bush to shit.

She met with the Devil himself to secure the terms of her freedom. She was starving and her dress was stiff with old blood, but she clinked her teacup and curtsied before him.

Out in a gap in the shadows.

That particular trial is done. She and her husband rebuilt their house, a private one for them alone, with government money. The King of England is said to be writing her a letter.

She has thought of God's goodness since.

Speak, wilderness. Something's brushing and something sways. He made more stuff than His children could legislate. There are lifetimes of simple sentences no one has ever spoken. The moon is rolling through the sky, its secrets untold. Speak, wilderness—no one cut your tongue. Planets, insects and animals, other men's wives, trouble the New World's thresholds. They tear the American night.

Pedagogical Uses for *The Captivity and Restoration of Mary Rowlandson*

1.

The next day I spent at the health food store
Shaking my self at a picnic table
Beckoning back reality
As cowboys cantered by in SUVs

2.

After many weary steps we came to Wachuset, where my Master was; and glad I was to see him. He asked me, when I washt me? I told him not this month; he then bid me wash, and gave me the Glass to see how I lookt.

3.

This [body/stanza/country/story] is *uncomfortable*
What can hold my belongings
My academic aspirations
Chafe against my Lean Cuisines

Beckoning back reality

The work I do:

The man I give my “heart” to:

The way I—

4.

form

assignment no. 1

describe *form* without using the word *form*

now use *form* to prove you (never) said it

5.

Ocean Springs, MS—

John as a boy

Lay down early

Nearly dead of drugs:

[I envy the golden light he removed from the story

golden

what is evil without pain

light acute on the playground, to know the secrets

I remember the episode like the memory of a migraine]

God said *give me your hand*

I thought of nothing else as

I passed thru[1]

6.

form

assignment no. 2

The way I—

---

[1] I passed so fast
I barely had time to notice
[Either] It didn't happen
[Or] There is nothing *but* this seductive sunlight,
It is possible, possible

I've heard His voice before

I throw it back in the ocean

It doesn't fit

*

see you through

a window

a mirror

a locked decade

a door, a door, God, a door:

7.

As available as a motel with vacancies

In my neighborhood, ignored

Opportunity: His hand

8.

I know, *I know*, there's a reality behind reality, a terrible form taking place.

9.

I've sat here right here and seen the pattern against which death is relief.

You can read people talking about it on the Internet.

I stabbed my chest with my fist, hoping to die from the blow.

Full and distant, the moon laughed—

Everything you've done—

10.

The way I drive my car:

The way I do my hair:

The way I place my hands at my side at my hair at my

Side again bite my nails:

Et cetera: &:

Awareness of:

I came to remember from before my life began &:

After that I said, 11., I cannot go through life alone. Hand me a husband, I mean it. It's not funny.

12.

To build a form,

a raft

a shield,

for when

13.

In the busy mirror I saw another mirror [in the crowded mirror]

14.

I was utterly hopeless of getting home on foot the way that I came. My head also was so light, that I usually reeled as I went, but I hope all those wearisome steps that I have taken are but a forwarding of me to the Heavenly rest. I know, O Lord, that thy judgments are right, and that thou in faithfulness has afflicted me. Psal cxix. 75.

15.

I have let myself forget

the four-by-four I knew,

the loops, the square.

It was sort of like a quatrain crossed with an orgasm:

16. & That I Will Forget It For As Long As I Shall Live & Live & Live Again, Amen.

17.

What is the name of my life

O Lord,

so afflicted,

the red inner devil at the bottom

where I fell with a thud into my life from which I, eighteen,

so afflicted fell

I fell when I fell into my life

is a loss I can’t recover

19.

20.

In the sentence, “how many people do you know who have died?” I am the “one.”

you. Fate flies home to the mark. Can any words restore to me how you *felt*?

- Susan Howe, *The Birth-mark* (4)

Hell is Form[less]: A Treatise on Form in Exactly 500 Words Under the Influence of Susan Howe

1. Hell is form. As I child I feared being buried alive so much I knew I'd bring it on. Calculating in the deep me how long I would be inside the box, the last sight I ever did see no sight at all. And, Lucy, after *that* the Hell begins.

2. Hell is formless. I've seen snatches of it outside the consciousness I know. Falling through, no hand to hold, no alphabet. I saw a real red devil in a bar mirror as I was falling through, and when I "came to," I couldn't file *that fact* any place I knew.

3. "Form and force begin with Him. If there is evil in the Universe, it is good and therefore marvelous. Law scans the grammar of liberty and surrender. Catastrophe is a matter of fact. Who opens the door in God's face?" – Susan Howe, from "The Captivity and Restoration of Mary Rowlandson"

4. When my chapbook was published, I was nervous because half the poems in it were acrostics using the name of this guy I once—whatever, that's not the point. The point is, it seemed embarrassing that I'd used what was obviously *a real man's name* as an organizing formal device.

5. No one mentioned the acrostics. I asked a friend in whom I had confided my nervousness; he said he'd looked and couldn't find them. How could he miss them? Hello, hello is anybody listening? Of the embarrassment, I take it back—I'll take the shame. Just please really read it.

6. Hell is formless. Disorganized, no boxes or folders or files. Like the mess it is in Stanley Elkin's book *The Living End*. "It had no engine room, there was no bridge, its energy, all its dreadful combustion perhaps from the cumulative, collective agony of the inmates. Nothing could be done."

7. Susan Howe, letter to Lyn Hejinian. [Va. Woolf]: " ... widely published, surrounded by successful men—and a loving husband. Walked into a river one March day. All the layers in work that the critics never never never reach—like the fathomless bottom of the sea—are in that fact."

8. Hell is form. "As for we who love to be astonished..." Hejinian repeats and repeats in her poetical autobiography *My Life*. The first time I read *My Life*, it seemed I knew that phrase already, like some piece of confusion from a dream, from *my* life, and I hated it.

9. Mary Rowlandson: "...yet could I not shed one tear in their sight; but rather had been all this while in a maze, and like one astonished; but now I may say, as *Psal*. Cxxxvii. *By the rivers of* Babylon, *there we sat down, yea we wept when we remembered Zion.*"

10. Mary Rowlandson, a perfect Puritan wife, was kidnapped by Indians during King Philip's War. Her children died, her home was ruined. Her 1681 captivity narrative takes the form of twenty "removes." From the packed white house Hell beat down on. She recited psalms sewed clothes. Gnawed on rancid meat. Changed.

CHAPTER 3:

MY HENRY JAMES

No One's Master

Is it not the characteristic of reality to be *unmasterable*? And is it not the characteristic of any system to *master* it?

- Roland Barthes (*Barthes* 172)

Henry James has appeared as a fictional character or abiding spiritual presence in more than a dozen novels and short stories since the millennium, including Colm Tóibín's *The Master* and David Lodge's *Author, Author,* which competed for critical and popular attention in what Lodge later called "The Year of Henry James," 2004. Both novels imagine James's consciousness in his final years. In Cynthia Ozick's "Dictation" (2008), meanwhile, James plays second fiddle to his feisty typist, Theodora Bosanquet. In Joyce Carol Oates's "The Master at St. Bartholomew Hospital, 1914-1916" (2008), James surprises even himself by serving as a wartime hospital volunteer. Given James's many valences in recent fiction, it feels appropriate to repurpose the question that Captain Yule asks the butler, Chivers, in James's 1907 play "The High Bid"—

I mean to whom do you beautifully belong?

—a phrase is so distinctively Jamesian that Max Beerbohm incorporated it into his caricature of James's late style "The Guerdon" (1916), written on the occasion of James's Order of Merit. Beerbohm is a perfect mimic of what I think of as James's "soft peaks," the way he whips a flat puddle of almost-nothing into a substantial point, something you can almost hold onto. In "The Guerdon," Beerbohm's Lord Chamberlain,

while bringing to the King a list of people to be commended, realizes there is a name missing. Beerbohm writes,

> This omission so loomed for him that he was to be conscious, as he came to the end of the great moist avenue, of a felt doubt as to whether he could, in his bemusement, now 'place' anybody at all; to which condition of his may have been due the impulse that, at the reached gates of the palace, caused him to pause and all vaguely, all peeringly inquire of one of the sentries: "To whom do you beautifully belong?" (qtd. in Felstiner 466)

Beerbohm's parody is so spot-on because he knows that what is greatest about James stems from what can feel absurd about him. To a mind as obsessive as the Master's, following a character's consciousness to—and sometimes past—the edge of what language has the capacity to accomplish, it probably seemed perfectly reasonable to modify the word belong. In a line of dialogue. In a play. Anything but deprive his audience of the precision—with its sliver of hope for human connection—that he had the power to provide. Language was utterly insufficient, but it was what he had to work with, so James worked and sweated inside it, and changed it.

Who can know such a mind? Not Tóibín or Lodge or Ozick or Oates, though none of those writers are unacquainted with literary greatness on their own terms. Not T.S. Eliot, who spent a lot of time trying, and came up with what sounds like a withering dis, although it was intended as highest praise: "He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it." Even Gore Vidal, whose ear is usually so well-tuned to the most esoteric of writerly communications, misread Eliot's intentions and had to apologize in the *New York Review of Books*. If I didn't know better, I might think Eliot's phrasing was *intentionally* ambiguous. I don't doubt Eliot's belief in James's greatness, but maybe he was unwilling to offer what could sound, to any ear, like a last word on the Master. Poke

an enduring statement on James, it seems, and it suddenly it is a question. I mean, to whom do you beautifully belong?

Nick Guest, the protagonist of Alan Hollinghurst Booker Prize-winning *The Line of Beauty* (2004, another Year of Henry James alum), has a more sympathetic ear than does Beerbohm for that bit of James's late phrasing. Holding forth to his friends about James, on whom he is abstractedly writing a graduate thesis, Nick says, "There's a marvelous bit in his play *The High Bid*, when a man says to the butler in a country house, 'I mean, to whom do you beautifully *belong*?'" (183). Nick's pretentious admiration for James at his most rococo hints at the mismatch between the glamour of Nick's life as he imagines it and Nick's life as it is, reckless and boring at the same time.

But where does one place one's feet, standing before the Master? Lodge and Tóibín cannily begin their novels at the lowest part of James's life, after the reception of one of his terrible plays, when he seems least masterly. When *The Master* was published, critics celebrated Tóibín's elaborate linkages between specific scenes that his James encounters in life, and the images, plots, and characters of James's late novels. But such a neat "solution" to the mystery of James's deep genius does not square with *my* James—the hazy but everpresent character I have inadvertently invented as I read and reread him, who speaks not only through but from behind his works. My Henry James was after the *un*knowable, the indiscernible, or the barely discernable.

In his masterliness, his resistance. He beautifully belongs to no one.

The Master

Dusk starts early, at a long low angle from the middle of the day. The waving shadows of leaves make a dappled forest on the sidewalk, a stronger suggestion of greenery than the trees provide. We've completely fucked up the environment. The centuries he traveled in are over.

He wouldn't have found you charming. He wouldn't have dropped his pen or an hour for you. He wouldn't have met you in Venice when the weather was pleasant, and walked with you arm-in-arm by the water. Had you attended the same Tuesday or Thursday at the apartments of some American actress wintering in Florence, he would have covertly liberated his pocketwatch while you catalogued your literary faults (albeit the most venal of them, leaving the mortal ones unmentioned); his eye would register the time as his chins stayed steady, his judgment tucked in like an undershirt. Unvideoed on bicycle; turning his gaze from an elderly woman on the other side of the opera house as she beheld without expression the empty stage: he happened without you. He didn't know you and you don't know him. You wouldn't want to. When he had a thought, no matter how wild, he bit and bridled it and rode it home.

Giving My Life To It

He flicked his wrist and roman candles tossed stars
like maids pouring rotten milk into the alley.
Thirty years of Thursdays are turned sideways,
stacked like ironed napkins in a cabinet.
The days surrounding go from errand to
errand like leaping between rocks
in a livid river. This city is a history of disasters,
its turgid churches pulling down
the firmament. Living on the long side
of our lives, we are ruins, our bodies upright
because we’re too tired to collapse entirely. Our thoughts,
wrung out and public, we drop
into any available hole in the ground.

Settings for the Film Version

"She had thought them trifles at the time; now she saw that they had been weighted with lead. Yet even now they were trifles after all..." — Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (452)

1. The Courtesy Diner on Kingsbury, wiped clean of any traffic in the rain, in the middle of the night in the middle of the week. Lit from inside, brighter against the indifferent streets than *Nighthawks*, more finely detailed than *Chop Suey*.

2.

"I'll talk to her!" he says.

*

The scene changes and we see a different guy talking to another her.

3. All the closed books on shelves I'll never open, waiting without waiting

for a *spiritual visitation*.

4. A gray day in Ann Arbor, *far away under the sky.* Walking to my basement apartment, I resisted the urge to smash my head against the pavement. When I got home, I sat quietly and finished *Chilly Scenes of Winter*. The whole thing takes place in the stonecold hardwood ‘80s. He spends it playing tapes and trying to get her back, if memory serves.

5. A bookshelf containing only the books that have fucked with me, changed my memories, shuffled the patterns of the bedspreads on which I arranged my stuffed animals.

6. Joan Didion listing among the hippies. I think she’s leaning against the *fact of a doorframe* against which Adrienne Rich banged her head. She’s never stood the wrong way in her life. Me, I’ve never stood the right way.

7. The stained glass Midwestern main reading room, full funding. I cannot remember his name, but I remember the unnatural attention he brought to his writing, looking up from his page with a hard stare at whatever was in the way of his deeper sight.—Or was it *natural*?

8. Earlier that life, the parking lot outside the U City Library, St. Louis, Missouri, where I worked as a shelver. The elaboration of cracks major and minor was deeper than any language. I saw through the okayness of things, unfortunately. Later that day, I threw my phone away.

9. On the overexperienced Big Sky highway, Brian and I passed the sign for ROCK SPRINGS.

10. The area behind the places I go, any city or town—to *interfuse* my tepid passion with a sense of depth. *Long-unanswered prayers* piled without filing system, like the sweaters I left at college, having stored them in a drawer beneath a windowseat that I forgot existed, though I stared at it for hours every day.

After the Year of Henry James: The Undermining of Authority in Short Fictions by Cynthia Ozick and Joyce Carol Oates

"How did you ever dare write a portrait of a lady? Fancy any woman's attempting a portrait of a gentleman!"

—Constance Fenimore Woolson (*LHJ* 535)

Among more than a dozen recent fictional works that center on, invoke, or in some way involve Henry James, critical and popular attention has tended to coalesce around the novels—and the narrative—of what David Lodge has called "The Year of Henry James," 2004. J. Russell Perkin, Cora Kaplan, and Daniel Hannah have done notable scholarship articulating the variations between Colm Tóibín's *The Master* and Lodge's *Author, Author*, both biographical fictions published nearly simultaneously. Less critical attention has been paid to fictional versions of James by contemporary female creative writers. In this essay, I will analyze short stories by Cynthia Ozick and Joyce Carol Oates, arguing that the focus on Lodge's and Tóibín's novels has meant that texts by women offering subversive constructions of James's authorship and the author fiction genre have gone largely unnoticed. Read together and contextualized among the many recent works of fiction about James, Ozick's and Oates's stories suggest that such works can be sites of poststructural investigations into authorship, authority, and genre.

Many critics writing on the recent popularity of James as a fictional character have asked and attempted to answer versions of what Jay Parini terms "the obvious question": "Why does James attract this attention?" Answers based on the male-authored

texts out of "The Year of Henry James," with its "big hitters Lodge, Tóibín, and [Alan] Hollinghurst" and "victims" like Michiel Heyns (Thurschwell, "Remains" 4), cast James in the role of looming influence, wherein unsuccessful novels evince "defeat by [one's] precursor" (Perkin 126). Focusing on Oates and Ozick raises additional questions about genre, gender, and form. Why does the attention that James attracts result in fictional biographies/biographical novels? What about James or his reception might induce creative writers to take up hybrid forms? How can James's fictional presence be understood in terms outside of Bloom's "anxiety of influence" figuration (which, as Gilbert and Gubar first noted, is not necessarily a suitable framework for understanding works by female authors)? In addition to their shared interest in destabilizing authority—of both James and genre—there are reasons of reception to consider Oates's and Ozick's depictions of James side by side, as Lodge's and Tóibín's have been. Like Lodge's and Tóibín's novels, Oates's "The Master at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, 1914-1916" and Cynthia Ozick's "Dictation" were published nearly simultaneously in 2008. As if to drive home the simultaneity of Oates's and Ozick's James-related publications, the collections in which their stories appeared both received reviews in the April 20, 2008, issue of the *New York Times Book Review*. The reviewers, like subsequent critics, read Oates's and Ozick's James-oriented stories in the context of the authors' previous works, rather than as contributions to the growing subgenre of biographical fiction about James.[1]

Issues of genre are relevant particularly in considering Oates and Ozick, because of how both writers have challenged generic boundaries in their critically inclined writings on and readings of James in addition to their fictions involving him. In a 1982

[1] As American women writers fictionalizing James, Ozick and Oates join a tradition that dates from James's contemporaries, including Edith Wharton and Constance Fenimore Woolson, whose fictionalized versions of James have often been cast as revenge against James's actions or inactions as an editor, friend, would-be lover, or all of the above. More recently, fictional versions of James have appeared in Carol de Chellis Hill's Henry James's Midnight Song (1993), Kathryn Kramer's Sweet Water (1998), and Paula Marantz Cohen's What Alice Knew

essay on the perils of overexposure to James at an early age, Ozick calls Leon Edel's five-volume biography of James "a nonfiction novel" ("Lesson" 5). Ozick also has described her first encounter with James's tale "The Beast in the Jungle" in terms of genre: "I was astounded by this story and thought, at seventeen, that it was my autobiography" ("Interview" 320). Under Ozick's astonishment, "The Beast in the Jungle" undergoes a change of genre and authorship—from short fiction by James to autobiography by Ozick-as-James or James-as-Ozick. Elsewhere, Ozick describes as "novel-like" Lyndall Gordon's *A Private Life of Henry James* ("Selfishness" 146).[2] (Gordon's biography opens with a dramatic scene of James drowning the newly dead Woolson's dresses in one of Venice's deep canals—a scene that, Perkin notes, "may never have happened" [115]) Oates, meanwhile, has called James's story "The Middle Years" a "confession" ("Madness" 259). Reading "The Middle Years" as an autobiographical author fiction, Oates finds, in the mournfully elegiac tones with which the story's novelist-protagonist Dencombe considers his life's work, "echoes" of James's own loneliness (259). Oates's and Ozick's creative, expansive attitudes toward genre and James in their critical writing anticipate the playful registers of their later author fictions in which James is a character.

Borders between biographical fiction, biography, and related forms might be hazier than even phrases like biographical fiction imply. Writing on the recent profusion of Virginia Woolf "biofictions," Monica Latham defines and refines that term, showing how novels like Michael Cunningham's The Hours (2000) "are more than life-writing hybrids combining fact and fiction, as they could also be considered sequels, variations, spin-offs, pastiches, parallels, imitations, or homages to Woolf's works" (357). Laura E.

[2] See Rivkin for a discussion of the slippage in Ozick's identification with James/Marcher in a similar quotation from Ozick's essay "The Lesson of the Master" (2-3).

Savu defines the subgenre "author fictions" as addressing "authors and what they are, as well as were like; authors and the works they create; authors and the fiction written about them" (9). The various terms used to indicate the genre are generally interchangeable, but because I focus on short stories here, and because part of my goal is to show that short fiction can make interesting, experimental, and useful contributions to fictional biography without mimicking the form of the novel *or* the biography, I generally use the terms "author fiction" and "biographical fiction."

"What Fun, Laughs Transgression": Cynthia Ozick's Henry James

Critics both popular and scholarly have characterized "Dictation" as Ozick's "revenge" on James—the same motivation attributed to James's female contemporaries who fictionalized him.[3] While attaching a Bloomian relationship to an author and his subject can serve as an invitation to further study, revenge, as Jessica Kent suggests in her reading of "Dictation" alongside James's "The Jolly Corner," offers limited critical possibilities.[4] Acknowledging the revenge thematic in "Dictation," I offer the term "disobedience" to describe the tone and function of Ozick's tale. In choosing this term, I refer to what the contemporary poet Alice Notley calls "the poetics of disobedience," her description of which includes "pushing against ideas of reality as solely what's visible." Among the many surprising moves of "Dictation" is its false start, mimicking recent biographical fiction about James and then taking an unexpected turn of plot and tone to

[3] See, for example, Benfey. Similarly, in *The Year of Henry James* Lodge quotes from Toby Litt's review of Emma Tennant's *Felony* (2004), which begins, "I don't know what Henry James ever did to Emma Tennant, but it must have been something pretty awful. Enough to have her take revenge upon him by making him the villain in her latest novel" (48).

[4] "Dictation" is Ozick's revenge on James only in the most "obvious sense," Kent argues (106), calling attention to the "very contemporary struggle for authority" at play in James's work and life—a struggle that speaks to the changing social meanings of authorship, as opposed to Ozick's own authorial identity (114).

focus on a powerfully disobedient female protagonist while provocatively alluding to Barthes's notion of the "death of the author." Even the length of "Dictation" signals its author's noncompliance with standards of contemporary literary behavior: at fifty pages, it hovers between novella and short story. That generic indeterminacy is in evidence on the *Amazon.com* page for *Dictation: A Quartet*, the book in which "Dictation" appears along with three pieces of similar length. The page excerpts a *Publisher's Weekly* review that calls *Dictation* "a collection of four stories," directly above an excerpt from a *Booklist* review referring to the book's "four novellas." The collection's subtitle, often a site of generic labeling, is (perhaps mischievously) mum on the matter.

Regardless of generic label, the length of "Dictation" suggests Ozick's formal identification with James (and with the other famous author figure in the text, Joseph Conrad). In his preface to the New York Edition of "The Lesson of the Master," James himself notes his oppression at the hands of literary journal editors who maintained "the hard-and-fast rule of the 'from six to eight thousand words,'"a word limit that disqualified his "ideal" form, the "*nouvelle*," or novella (*AN* 220). As the longest piece in *Dictation*, Ozick's title story is also the only one in the book that hasn't previously appeared in the *New Yorker* or the *Atlantic Monthly*. Perhaps the nonappearance of "Dictation" in such magazines is due to the "rude prescription of brevity at any cost" among literary markets that James disdained (*AN* 219). James's organizing principle for the volume containing "The Lesson of the Master," which also includes "The Figure in the Carpet" and three other "bantlings," is that these five pieces share a concern with "the artist enamored of perfection, ridden by his idea or paying for his sincerity" (220; 221). Among the four pieces in Ozick's *Dictation*, only the title story deals directly with James; however, each story is a variation on a Jamesian theme: the uses of language as a tool of both deception and revelation.

Reading "Dictation" as an act of literary disobedience, I argue that Ozick challenges the authority not of James, but of the ways in which other recent biographical fictions have tended to construct James. "Dictation" begins by calling upon the methods and moves of the author fiction genre, with James preparing to host Joseph Conrad for tea at Lamb House. Placing James at Lamb House, Ozick chooses familiar territory among fictional biographers of James. *The Master* and *Author, Author*, for example, include significant discussion of James's attachment to the British country home where he lived the last two decades of his life and died.[5] By opening with a tea, Ozick alludes to the opening scene of James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, with its lush, hollow promise of "an eternity of pleasure" (*PL* 3). It is not Ozick's emphasis on James as a character in the first moments of "Dictation," but the way in which she emphasizes him, alluding to specifics of his work and life, that evokes the biographical fictions of writers like Lodge and Tóibín. The story's subsequent turn away from James is all the more surprising, then, because it also marks a turn away from the conventions of author fictions.

The real star of "Dictation" and the fount of much of the story's disobedience, is Theodora Bosanquet, James's secretary, to whom he dictated his late novels. Ozick's Bosanquet acts with such direction and purpose that the story's other characters—masters or no—fall under the sway of her "determined map" (47). Although "Dictation" sets up social and literary pairings between James and Conrad, and between their two amanuenses, Ozick more subtly posits points of comparison between James and Bosanquet. In the shadow of the Master, Ozick's Bosanquet asserts a subversive authorship of her own. In an early scene, for example, Bosanquet tells Lilian Hallowes,

[5] Acquaintance with Lamb House seems to be something of a shibboleth among fictional biographers of James: to wit, Lodge, Tóibín, and Michiel Heyns have each written of visiting Lamb House for research purposes during what Lodge deduces to be the same summer (*Year* 18; see also Tóibín, "Haunting" and Heyns, "Curse.").

Conrad's amanuensis, how she came to work for James, underscoring her active role in the matter.

> I deliberately trained myself for Mr. James. Certain chapters of *The Ambassadors* were being dictated from a stenographer's transcription. I heard that Mr. James was dissatisfied and in need of a steady amanuensis, and I set myself to learn to type. It was a plot—I schemed it all. You will judge me a dangerous woman! (23-24)

Bosanquet's danger stems from her demonstrated control over and influence on the "plot" of both her own life and James's—and, indeed, of the plot of "Dictation." Bosanquet "deliberately" moves from hearing about "[c]ertain chapters of *The Ambassadors*" at a distance, to actively involving herself in chapters of James's life. Her scheming builds to a crescendo when she entangles Hallowes in yet another plot: to swap a chunk of text from James's current story-in-progress, "The Jolly Corner," with text from Conrad's, "The Secret Sharer," before the stories are delivered to the authors' shared agent. Bosanquet's plot serves double (metafictional) duty by also functioning as the plot around which "Dictation" turns, an indication of the power of Bosanquet's authorship even among Conrad and James.

By offering no clue as to which sentence in "The Jolly Corner" might have been swapped, Ozick also unsettles the firm authorial standing on which *all of* the story's sentences stand. As Bethany Layne argues in an important exception to the dearth of scholarship on biographical fiction about James by women, "Dictation" performs an "evacuating [of] the authorial body" from "The Jolly Corner" (254). That evacuation is particularly notable considering the story's generic designation as biographical fiction. The titles of *The Master* and *Author, Author,* which, as Kaplan writes, "both affirm and ironise the position of James as 'great writer'/great man," testify to those novels'

investment in the social constructions of authorship that relate James's life to his literary production (65). Layne's reading of "Dictation," meanwhile, suggests how deeply Ozick's sentence-swapping plot undermines the tenets on which author fictions tend to rely. Layne argues that the "queer dynamics" with which Ozick's Bosanquet approaches and couches her plot encourage queer readings of "The Jolly Corner" and "The Secret Sharer," while also resisting the typical biographical conclusions such readings tend to carry (252). Strikingly erotically charged passages in "The Jolly Corner" can seem like invitations to conjure their author as an explicitly "gay-identified James"; however, Layne shows, Ozick humorously disrupts such interpretations by planting doubt about whether James wrote them in the first place (254). How can questions regarding authors' sexual identities be settled, or even attempted, when authorial identity itself—" James" or "Conrad"—is so easily shaken?

Lodge's and Tóibín's literary resurrections of James center, as Perkin argues, on those writers' anxiety over James's influence; Ozick's James in "Dictation," meanwhile, is a projection screen against which to play acts of female authorship excluded from the "significant record" of literary history (Ozick, *Dictation* 50). The two sentences around which "Dictation" revolves remain unknown to the reader, and, as far as we know, to the story's close third-person narrator: Emblematic of Bosanquet's authorship, those sentences move masters and yet are off the record. Whether the story's narrator does not know the content of those two swapped sentences or does not reveal them, Ozick keeps them a secret, and, in so doing, she affirms Bosanquet's authorial secrecy, as if in on the conspiracy. Ozick's seeming identification with Bosanquet could be one of the reasons that "Dictation" has so often been called revenge. Reading Bosanquet's activity as, rather than an expression of Ozick's revenge on James, an example of Notleyian disobedience suggests the subversive power inherent in Bosanquet's role vis-à-vis James. James

famously—and contagiously, judging from the historical Bosanquet's use of the word, as well as Ozick's—called Bosanquet his "amanuensis" ("Bosanquet and James used it almost exclusively to refer to her position," Powers notes [qtd. in Bosanquet 4]). However, had Bosanquet done the same work anywhere but Lamb House, she likely would have been referred to as either a secretary or a typewriter. The slippage the latter term offers between the typewriting machine and the almost-always-female secretary who types *at* the machine is central to its literary power in Heyn's *The Typewriter's Tale*, which centers on a fictional (and renamed) Bosanquet's use of the typewriter to channel other realms of consciousness, an interest shared by the historical Bosanquet. Thurschwell argues that for Heyn's fictionalized version of Bosanquet, "seer, channeler, and, eventually, author" are not only related but inseparable roles ("Remains" 5). For Ozick's queer, feminist Bosanquet, the assertion of her power to change the Master's text is also an assertion that she is human, not machine. The historical Bosanquet might have had similar intent when, in her memoir *Henry James at Work* (1924), she underscored her "struggles with that baffling machine" (34). That Bosanquet's later, more extensive acts of authorship, including *Henry James at Work*, are not mentioned in "Dictation" suggests Ozick's use of Bosanquet to critique the integrity of James's authorship, as opposed to asserting Bosanquet's authorship in and of itself. However, the real-life Bosanquet's later writings also include voluminous automatic scripts channeling James, documents that exemplify the "indeterminate boundaries" of authorship and identity (Kent 113). Thurschwell's description of automatic writing and mediumship as, for Bosanquet, "existing on the cusp between inside and outside" forces, suggests that considering Bosanquet's authorship *in and of itself* might be to miss the historical Bosanquet's central authorial intention (*Literature* 106).

In “Dictation,” as, perhaps, in literary history, no character “authors” independently: Just as James’s authorship is caught up in Bosanquet’s, Bosanquet’s authorship is caught up in James’s. Another of the disobedient tactics of Ozick’s author fiction is its Barthesian assertion of the independent life of a text over the life of a text’s author. Ozick writes lyrically of Bosanquet’s successfully completed sentence swap: “There is no visible seam, no hair’s-breadth fissure; below the surface—submicroscopically, so to speak—the chemical amalgam causes no disturbance, molecule melds into molecule all serenely” (*Dictation* 49). After the death of the author, Barthes contends, a text refuses to be assigned an answer, a “secret” at its center that reveals its meaning (147). In “Dictation,” Ozick posits a secret within “The Jolly Corner,” but, in collusion with her protagonist, refuses the revelation of its content. Of the passage from the Balzac short story with which he begins “The Death of the Author,” Barthes writes: “No one, no ‘person,’ says it” (147). One could say the same of the switched sentences, touched by many authorial hands, in “Dictation.” Somewhere along its travels, such a passage likely stops “belonging” to an author. Kaplan offers Tóibín’s and Lodge’s biographical novels as counterevidence to Barthes’s proclamation-cum-call-to-action, arguing that the recent popularity of author fictions shows that Barthes’s death of the author “has been greatly exaggerated, or, conversely, that the threat has breathed new life into the idea of the author” (70-71). Ozick’s “Dictation” introduces a third possibility for biographical fiction—that, despite its necessary investment in the biographical details of the author’s life, the genre can also trace the disappearance of abiding grand narratives about authors and authorship.

At the end of “Dictation,” Ozick again attends to the conventions of author fictions by appending a paratextual note that clarifies what is fact and what is fiction. In fitting with Ozick’s disobedient approach to the genre, however, the note only serves to

mark the distance between Ozick's take on biographical fiction and that of Lodge, Tóibín, and others who have written James as a fictional character. Ozick's note, which appears at the bottom of the last page of the story, is unique among fictions about James for its playful tone. Ozick uses the note as occasion to emphasize the *fiction* in fictional biography:

> Among the historical actualities imagination dares to flout are club rules and death. Was Leslie Stephen in his grave nearly a decade before his appearance here, and was no woman permitted to set foot in London's all-male Reform Club? Never mind, says Fiction; what fun, laughs Transgression; so what? Mocks Dream. ("Dictation" 50)

Instead of sharing with her reader the factual, biographical bases for her tales, Ozick plays up its imaginative angle—a time-bending "transgression" similar to those that Tóibín performs in order to fit later events of James's life into the five-year period during which his novel takes place.

If Ozick's story seems stranger than fiction, perhaps it is. James and Conrad had an awkward friendship based on mutual, if somewhat tempered, respect and admiration. And Ozick's sentence-swapping plot has basis: Tintner notes that in *The Secret Agent* (1907), Conrad winkingly has Mr. Vladimir use the term "virtuous attachment," a phrase familiar from James's *The Ambassadors*, published three years prior (146). Meanwhile, in the "red tip of the cigar seen for a few seconds in the dark" in James's New York Edition of *Roderick Hudson* (1907), Tintner finds an echo from *Lord Jim* (1900): "Perhaps it was after dinner . . . in the deep dusk speckled by fiery cigar ends...Now and then a small red glow would loom abruptly" (qtd. in Tintner 146). Was Tintner a source for Ozick? Or has Ozick's lifelong study of James—from her 1950 master's thesis, "Parable in Henry James," to the 2010 novel *Foreign Bodies*, a riff on James's *The*

Ambassadors—equipped her to make an educated guess? Another passage of Jamesiana with similarly strong echoes in Ozick's tale is found in Lyall Powers's 2006 introduction to Bosanquet's *Henry James at Work*. Powers recounts the alacrity with which, under threat of a libel suit, Bosanquet revised James's preface for Robert Brooke's *Letters from America* as James lay ill. Bosanquet's artistry was such that "no seam shows and the stream of James's prose flows steadily on," Powers writes (18). Ozick's similar language in "Dictation"—"There is no visible seam . . . "—published two years after Powers's introduction, is perhaps an allusion to Powers (and to the real-life Bosanquet) along the lines of Conrad's Jamesian allusion in *The Secret Agent*. Powers quotes Mrs. William James appraising Bosanquet's adjustment to James's preface, sounding much like Ozick's Bosanquet: "Henry would never know he hadn't written it himself." Layne contends that the historical Bosanquet's "editing of James's preface is rather more writerly than secretarial" (251). Ironically, however, the historical Bosanquet first asserts her writerly self through her ability to seamlessly let flow (as if over her authorial identity) "the stream of James's prose." Nearly a century later, Ozick plays the role of James rather than that of Bosanquet, with her own prose the nonconformist standard by which any fragment of language, fact, or character from the "real world" must comply. Ozick's decision to omit her sources stands in contrast to Oates, who cites James's *Notebooks* and Leon Edel's five-volume biography; and to Lodge and Tóibín, both of whose notes sections resemble those of biographies, each citing more than a dozen works related to James. Ozick's story seems more like fiction and less like biography in part because Ozick omits some of the paratexts associated with biography.

Ozick's take on biographical fiction carries with it the suggestion that there are untold or hidden narratives not only between the lines of the "official" text(s) but embedded within. In an early essay Ozick writes, "Rupture doesn't attract me; I would

rather inherit coherence than smash and start over again with enigma" (qtd. in Kauvar 5). Yet in "Dictation," Ozick ingeniously introduces rupture into the record of published texts, thus paying homage to and relying on inherited coherences while also giving a nod to the school of smashing and starting over.

"Fiction on the Brink of Dissolving into Abstraction": Joyce Carol Oates's Henry James

Wild Nights! the volume of short stories in which Oates's "The Master at St. Bartholomew's Hospital," appears, bears the subtitle, "Stories About the Last Days of Poe, Dickinson, Twain, James, and Hemingway." While the stories in the collection vary formally—e.g., "Poe Posthumous; or, The Light-House" is a series of journal entries; "EdickinsonRepliLuxe" is a soft sci-fi tale—each centers on the dying, death, or afterlife of a canonized American author, providing Oates suggestive contexts within which to explore theoretical issues related to the myths that attach to great authors' lives and words. Oates suggests something of the philosophy behind those depictions in her 2003 essay "'JCO' and I (After Borges)," in which she distinguishes between her own publicly known, authorial self—"JCO"—and the consciousness she calls "I." Oates writes,

> No one wants to believe this obvious truth: the "artist" can inhabit any individual, for the individual is irrelevant to "art." (And what is "art"?—a firestorm rushing through Time, arising from no visible source and conforming to no principles of logic or causality.) "JCO" occasionally mines, and distorts, my personal history; but only because the history is close at hand, and then only when some idiosyncrasy about it suits her design, or some curious element of the symbolic. ("JCO" 154)

Here, as in *Wild Nights!*, Oates is skeptical toward the tendency of biographical literary criticism to assume stability in signs like "art" and "artist." The scare quotes Oates places around those two words seem designed to challenge that stability, as well as establish distance between Oates's average-Joe "I" and the "artist" JCO. Art follows its own, untraceable rules, "arising from no visible source," including the artist's life, Oates argues.

One has to look only as far as the cover of *Wild Nights!* for evidence of Oates's claim that "no one wants to believe" such a notion. A blurb from *Newsday* on the back of the 2009 Ecco Press paperback edition serves as a warning to those who might be averse to the notion of writers' lives as grounds for invention: "Joyce Carol Oates may cause a few elderly professors to keel over, but the rest of us can take perverse delight in her five surreal tales." The blurb associates impertinence or, to use Ozick's word, "rupture," with Oates's inventive approach to stories based on authors' biographies. The stories probably would have escaped the "perverse" label—which really is a label, given that it is affixed to the cover of the book and used as a selling point—had Oates disguised her author-protagonists by giving them other names. However, Oates is so insistent on using authors' actual names that Twain is referred to, in "Grandpa Clemens & Angelfish, 1906," as Samuel Clemens, rather than by his better-known nom de plume. The erudite, gentlemanly Clemens is "exhausted" from "performing the old Missouri buffoon 'Mark Twain'" (*Wild* 82). Oates draws a bright line between the publicly performed author and the person who performs that author. Her loosely biographical fiction centers on the person, demythologizing Twain and James by considering their personhood as separate from their work. Ironically, Oates demythologizes these writers by fictionalizing them. The perverse quality of Oates's own work here might be in its relationship to its generic category—that is, the ways in which it attends to being both biographical (Samuel

Clemens, not Mark Twain) and fictional (see the "surreal" tag in the book's blurb). However, Oates, unlike Tóibín or other fictionalizers of James (including those of James's period, like Wharton or Woolson), meets the Master on his own turf. That is, as one of the most prolific writers in American literary history, having won or been nominated for nearly every major literary prize in English, Oates's late-career vision of James is important for what it tells readers about both Oates and James.

Oates's decision to write James in a short story rather than a novel-length work allows her to return to, and recast, James's short story "The Middle Years." "The Madness of Art," Oates's 1996 essay on "The Middle Years," provides something of a roadmap to "The Master at St. Bartholomew's Hospital." Oates could be taking notes for her later short story on the Master as she observes that in "The Middle Years," Dencombe's loneliness springs from a specific desire for an audience—not a commercial one, but evidence, even in the form of a single person, that his novelistic messages have been received. Oates also notes the "powerful, even mystical language" that James uses to describe Dencombe rereading his latest, and surely his last, novel ("Madness" 260). James's attention here, Oates writes, is on

> the tremendous pressure of the unconscious; its unknowability. The processes of art yield, and in a way are lost in, the product of the artist's effort—the aesthetic object. We can infer the mysterious potency of the former by the evidence of the latter, but this is a mere inference, a glimmering of something vast, rich, deep, unchartable. (260)

Here, Oates argues, as she does later in "'JCO' and I," and, creatively, in *Wild Nights!*, for a perspective on art that makes a stranger, rather than an institution, of the artist/author. As he reads the book he has recently written, Dencombe has only as much insight as would any reader. What relation there is between the life and art remains "a

glimmering," nothing that can be mapped. In her reading of James's story, Oates focuses not on Dencombe's anxiety surrounding his literary legacy, but on how he finds relief from that anxiety under the care of a physician, Doctor Hugh, who turns out to be the very reader that the author has desired. Dencombe's "redemption," Oates argues, takes the form "of his communion with a real, palpable, emotionally engaged audience; a reaching-out to, a touching of this 'new generation'—the mysterious 'Doctor Hugh'—*you*" (262). (In Oates's "The Master at St. Bartholomew's Hospital," the first patient Henry cares for as a hospital volunteer is named Hugh.) For Oates, Dencombe's work comes to have meaning when it is read rather than when it is written. Having delivered his texts to a reader, Oates writes, Dencombe finds that "he *has* had glory, he *has* fulfilled his destiny" (261).

In "The Master at St. Bartholomew's Hospital," Oates reimagines "The Middle Years" with James in the role of Dencombe, a re-writing of James that provides occasion for fascinating and sly commentary on James's oeuvre and a redemptive death scene that echoes Dencombe's. Instead of a European health spa, Oates's James, two years before his death and shaky with angina and nervous energy, stands amid the grim horrors of a World War I-era veterans hospital. Where Ozick obscures James's presence in his own texts, Oates sets James in a context irrelevant to his authorship. Oates's James is not "Henry James," he of the American literary canon; he is Henry, an awkward, elderly volunteer at St. Bartholomew's Hospital. Henry is unable to get the attention of hospital staff, because

> his cultured voice was too hesitant. Hospital personnel passed him by without a glance. St. Bartholomew's was a great London hospital in a time of national crisis and its atmosphere of urgency and excitement was a rebuke to him, a solitary civilian figure of a certain age. His large deep-set blinking eyes took in the

> dismaying fact, as so often they did in recent years, that he was by far the oldest individual in sight. He lacked a uniform of any kind: neither medical, or military. (*Wild* 139)

The deliberate, "cultured" manner for which James would be known by Oates's readers is not what is called for here, where almost everything about James is wrong, from his clothing, to his age, to his physical stance, to the sound of his voice. Oates introduces James in, and to, a setting in which his public "master" status is irrelevant, if not unreadable to those around him.

Having placed Henry in a context in which his authorship has no cultural value, Oates gives him a crash course in the horrors of the physical world. Caring for patients, including his favorite charge, Scudder, a lieutenant from Norwich, in such dirty, smelly environs, Henry feels "chastised": "in all of the Master's lauded fiction, not one individual, male or female, inhabited an actual physical body, still less a body that *smelled*" (157). When he is observed by staff kissing Scudder's bloody stump of a leg, Henry is beaten with a paddle in the head nurse's office, banned from visiting with soldiers in his beloved Ward Six, and made instead to do the most degrading jobs in the hospital. Henry crawls his way back to Scudder through bedbugs, feces, and vomit: He sinks ever further into the realm of what Georges Bataille calls "heterology," the taboos of "defecation; urination; death" (94). Bataille theorized, and sought for himself, an expression of literary and philosophical outsider-hood that resisted the sterilizing effect of public admiration *or* public rejection—both of which, he argued, ultimately result in the expulsion of what cannot be assimilated. Tóibín's closeted Henry of *The Master* finds himself eagerly awaiting daily gossip from Edmund Gosse regarding Oscar Wilde's indecency trial. Henry's synthesis of the spectacle is exemplary of Bataille's social

theory. Henry and Gosse conjecture about how a mutual friend might have reacted to Wilde's scandal.

> "He would have loathed Wilde, of course," Gosse said, "the vulgarity and the filth."
>
> "Yes," Henry said patiently, "but he would have been captured by what came into the open." (Tóibín, *Master* 74)

Bataille contends that the cultural spewing out "into the open" of scandal captures not only people's interests, but their personal freedom as well. Gosse's and Henry's exchange in *The Master* exemplifies the expulsion of the unacceptable "*foreign body*" from their society (Bataille 92).[6] Bataille's vision of revolution, meanwhile, could be a description of a day on Ward Six in Oates's story: "a profound complicity with natural forces such as violent death, gushing blood, sudden catastrophes and the horrible cries of pain that accompany them, terrifying ruptures of what had seemed to be immutable, the fall into stinking filth of what had been elevated" (101). Henry of "The Master of Bartholomew's Hospital," who comes to spend much of his time among "the vulgarity and the filth" of the body, moves further away from Tóibín's portrait of Master-hood and toward a Bataillean "fall into stinking filth." The heterological context into which Oates thrusts Henry, causing him to question the contexts and contents of his works, could also be read as Oates calling into question James's mastery, or indicating its limits.

Oates's characterization of "The Middle Years" as "fiction on the brink of dissolving into abstraction" is also a fitting description of "The Master at St. Bartholomew's Hospital" ("Madness" 259). Dencombe's redemption comes in the

[6] Adding to the sense of Wilde's "foreignness" is Wilde's Irishness, another quality that Tóibín's Henry finds distasteful. Tóibín, who, Updike notes, reserves "extra animation" for Irish themes, emphasizes Henry's discomfort at Wilde, "loud and large and Irish as [Wilde] was" (Tóibín, *Master* 15). Wilde, Tóibín writes, "always carried a threat of Ireland with him. Even London could not contain him with two plays and many rumors all running at the same time" (67).

discovery that he has touched an audience, and Oates gives Henry a parallel creative redemption. Henry's redemption is *creative* in the sense that his creative life redeems him and is itself redeemed—and in the sense that Oates redeems him through fictionality, rather than through the biographical facts of James's life. In the swirlingly impressionistic final scene of the story, Henry and the lieutenant are aboard a great ship, sailing to their deaths. The distance between patient and caretaker, artist and audience, are blurred; and reality and fantasy meld into one. Henry believes himself simultaneously on the deck of a ship and at home on a divan, as "the young Lieutenant remained at his side, and guided his hand that moved as if he were writing with only just his fingers" (Oates, *Wild* 183). Their roles reversed, the young man becomes Henry's guide—even in writing, moving his fingers—scudding him forward into death. Although Henry has forgotten the lieutenant's name, he is ecstatic to be in the lieutenant's presence. Led by the nameless, all-but-faceless, wounded man, Henry cedes his authority/authorship entirely. In the story's final image, the lieutenant beckons to Henry, holding out his hand. Like Dencombe of "The Middle Years," Henry finds redemption via "a reaching-out to, a touching of this 'new generation.'"

Oates's Henry moves away, across the course of the story, from identification with his own authorship. The sympathetic qualities by which we come to know Oates's Henry—his vulnerability and touching mortality—are revealed only in the absence of his mastery. As an author fiction, "The Master at St. Bartholomew's Hospital" differs most notably from biographical fictions like Tóibín's and Lodge's in the ideological distinction it draws between Henry's personal life and the institution of James's authorship. Oates's association of the "unchartable" with authorship, and, specifically, with James, stands in stark contrast to the methods and ideologies of *Author, Author* and *The Master*, which, as Hannah notes, forefront "our own desires . . . to know the authors behind published

works" (72). Oates's short work destabilizes the connections and associations between James's life, consciousness, and works, out of which Tóibín and Lodge construct novels.

In an interview about the biographical novel, Oates underscores her commitment to describe obscurity of artistic intent, rather than resolve it. "I'm trying to express the mystery and opacity of life," she says (Oates, "Interview" 185). Oates's responses in the interview seem pointedly laconic, expressions of a living "I" against the vast and mysterious literary output of "JCO": "I don't really know why writers do what they do and I think most people don't know the reason. Evolutionary psychology teaches us that people's motives are very obscure" (184). Against Oates's flat assertions of unknowing, one could contrast Tóibín's *The Master*, which, as Kaplan writes, is "structured around the transmutation of loss into writing" (69). Tóibín has written of the five-year period during which he sets *The Master*, the significance of which, he explains,

> is that Henry James was building up the images and figures that would constitute the three masterpieces he was gathering all his strength to write: *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl*...In my book, I offer him some of the images he will need for his last great novel *The Golden Bowl*. ("Venice" 201)

Tóibín's work relies on observable relations between specific "images and figures" that James encounters in his life and mind, and the images, plots, and people that later appear in James's work. What Mendelsohn terms Tóibín's "failure of sympathy" is related to Tóibín's attempt to imbue each of Henry's thoughts and memories with some finite meaning, whether a specific scene in a late-period novel or a moral act (Mendelsohn 7). However, as Mendelsohn suggests, after every experience of Henry's is matched to a later literary feat, after every memory tied to a moral misdeed, the mystery of James's genius lingers.

I would like to close by commenting on the statement, taken from one of Woolson's many letters to James, that I have used as an epigraph. Woolson's comment, part of a detailed and largely complimentary response to *The Portrait of a Lady*, could, depending on the gloss, be made in admonishment of James's overreaching (Showalter 207) or in deference to his mastery (Habegger 5). Part of the pleasure in reading Woolson's quotation is that it was clearly composed before the "portrait of a lady" she references became a cultural institution as *The Portrait of a Lady* and that it is directed to a friend who, although both knew he was the finer writer, was not yet culturally institutionalized as the Master. Woolson's statement today, with its extant ambiguity and buzzing suggestion of irreverence—*how dare you?*—performs some of the same work as Oates's and Ozick's author fictions. Woolson writes to James at a moment before the sign of his authorship has a substantive, recognizable value, and the tone she takes underscores those conditions. As the author fictions of Oates and Ozick suggest, such a moment is not necessarily historical but theoretical. Writing against the grain of recent author fictions, both writers present versions of Henry James that challenge our notions of his authority over his own work.

Inscribed as well in James's own theory of fiction is a sense of the rebellion against institutions of authorship. In "The Art of Fiction" (1884), James describes how Anne Thackeray Ritchie, "a woman of genius," developed an entire story from an image she caught through an open door (*EL* 52). It was not the sight itself but a particular quality with which Ritchie looked. She was, James writes, "blessed with the faculty which when you give it an inch takes an ell, and which for the artist is a much greater source of strength than any accident of residence or of place in the social scale" (53). That James's representative novelist here is a woman is a striking example of James's deep ambivalence toward the figure of the woman writer (see, for example, Habegger and

Coulson). Oates's "obvious truth," in "JCO and I," that "the 'artist' can inhabit any individual," recalls James's point, and even his phrasing ("any accident"), which emphasizes the randomness of those social markers that figure centrally into James's epistemology. The randomness that James makes a point of suggests that the "greater" quality—the artistry—travels by accident, like lesser social qualities. James theorized a literary "faculty" that could appear in anyone, regardless of gender or class, and that, like Oates's sense of writerly genius, operates without the permission or understanding of the person it inhabits. James's image of a woman writer receiving the setting for a story through an open door is a fitting illustration of how Ozick and Oates fictionalize James. Turning from the sign of James's authorship, both writers have found open doors.

CHAPTER 4:

MY MARK TWAIN

Mark Twain's Lucy Biederman

The poems that follow are my unsuccessful ventriloquisms of Twain's character Hank Morgan, the nineteenth-century time traveler of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. And they are my account of what I cannot ventriloquize about Twain or Hank Morgan. *I* keep poking through.

Mark Twain's America.

A trickster, Missouri Compromiser, Twain seems to be nearly every kind of American regional writer: Western, Midwestern, Northeastern, Southern... Mark Twain of Quarry Farm, Elmira. Mark Twain of Hannibal, MO. Mark Twain of Buffalo. Mark Twain of Carson City. Hartford Mark Twain. Mark Twain Abroad.

I'd do that. It's that shiftiness about him I most understand. Maybe he was looking for unincorporated territory, but he canonized every place he landed.

Mark Twain's Middle Ages.

Looking back through my notes about Twain, I see that at one point I made a list of some of the "technologies" that Hank introduces into sixth century life:

A lariat

Gun-powder

A pipe

Sandwich-board advertisements

The telephone

Newspapers

Toothbrushes and toothpaste

A bomb

Soap

Guns

Trains

Electricity

Mark Twain's Jokes.

The narrator-protagonist of Jenny Offill's recent novel-in-fragments *Dept. of Speculation* confesses,

> "Three things no one has ever said about me:
>
> "*You make it look so easy.*
>
> "*You are very mysterious.*
>
> "*You need to take yourself more seriously*" (n.p.).

No one would say those things about me, either.

But I would say all three statements of Twain.

Leslie Fiedler: "American literature likes to pretend, of course, that its bugaboos are all finally jokes" (26).

In "the poisonous air bred by those dead thousands" at the end of *Connecticut Yankee*, there is a competition for the last laugh, as Hank exits the scene, leaving his right-hand

man Clarence to “write it for him” in a postscript (442-3). Clarence recounts the death of Merlin, who, in “a delirium of silly laughter,” accidentally electrocutes himself:

“I suppose his face will retain that petrified laugh until the corpse turns to dust...” (443).

Enter “Mark Twain” in a second postscript, knocking politely on Hank’s nineteenth-century door. Hank is let loose again, in all his confusion, “delirium, of course, but so real!” (446)

Mark Twain’s Apocalypse.

Connecticut Yankee: “To-morrow. *It is here. And with it the end.” (443)*

Mark Twain’s Theses.

I usually assume I’m right, until I find out I’ve been wrong, and then I turn over easily, like a new engine. That’s me, Lucy.

A picaresque with a thesis, two theses, many theses pointing in many directions: That’s Mark Twain to me.

Mark Twain’s Pipe.

Everett Emerson: “Clemens’s favorite location for smoking was bed.... And the woman who shared the bed of an inveterate smoker through three decades of an apparently happy marriage was more than inconvenienced; she was victimized” (555). I couldn’t stop thinking about this for a while after I read it, then I thought of it again watching the Ken Burns documentary about Twain, photographs giving way to each other in the Burnsian

style, like thick curtains parted to reveal more curtains, Twain smoking in Connecticut, Twain smoking in Italy, Twain smoking after his poor wife, Olivia, started dying, and, then, as he grieved Olivia, smoking.

Mark Twain's Details. When I was a little girl, I used to be afraid that I was only the person in the world who had ever read certain dusty "chapter books" from the library. It made me feel terribly lonely, until my mom explained to me that every book, at the very least, went through an editor.

Deep in the current of a Twain novel I recall that old feeling, as if some of the scenes Twain wrote weren't intended to be read. Looking closely at such scenes, it seems I am working at cross-purposes to the books in which they appear, taking it too seriously. Those people shut up in the dungeon in *Connecticut Yankee*, for example. "Their very imagination was dead. When you can say that of a man, he has struck bottom, I reckon; there is no lower deep for him. I rather wished I had gone some other road" (182). The torturous ins and outs of Tom Sawyer's tricks. One particular scene in *Roughing It*, which I think I care more about than Twain seems to, even though *he*'s the one who almost died, caught in the cold overnight with no sign of safety. "We were all sincere, and all deeply moved and earnest, for we were in the presence of death and without hope. I threw away my pipe, and in doing it felt that at least I was free of a hated vice and one that had ridden me like a tyrant all my days. ... Oblivion came. The battle of life was done" (701). Of course it's a trick, a joke: Two pages later our narrator is smoking in perfect hilarity. I should have known better. Twain brings characters back around, he reprises, but he keeps it moving: down the river, through the centuries, way out West. Away from our bugaboos.

Mark Twain's Beauty.

Like John Berryman, Grace Paley, Alice Walker, geniuses of the American vernacular who write in Twain's grainy shadow, the beauty of Twain's writing frustrates. It hides itself when excerpted, or masquerades as cute. There's a quality to Huck Finn's curiosity—when he describes the Grangerfords' tacky house, for example— that I can't convey without "quoting" all of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, every single word of it.

Twain is more beautiful and baggy and bad to me than any excerpt would show.

I take him seriously.

Often I Am Permitted to Recall How

I was at home in that chronotope,

that way of being awake.

I read a mediocre novel about the golden age
of artificial sweeteners
as I rode a cross-country train.

Prisoners made license plates,
I think,
and we wore them on our cars.

Although I didn’t necessarily like it,
without it I’m unreadable.

You should see the future
from this wide-angle lens.
A dry field with patches

of long grass from time to time

to time, however and ever the end

Long After Adorno

There’s nothing wrong with this century

Every atrocity

I’ve assented to

Or pulled over

To let pass

There’s nothing wrong with this century

That hasn’t been wrong before

On this Highway

By my voice

Or my choices

Do you know me

I don’t feel very well as I write this

I’m not a barber

Or in an ancient mood

I’m not a barbarian

But I’ve been wrong before

I don’t feel very well as I write this

I said nothing

Lariat

Swinging

my horseheld

century,
I brought it with me.

You took over,
tied it,

sun at the movie theater marquee,
sun crimping the sky

with shrieks of pink and purple
as it signs off for the

evening,

tied it
around my life.

Another Sip

Primed for horseless trains to change

its very shape,

the nation,

capital-based to the core of each individual

citizen,

is working.

The sky below is white as a lab coat.

He takes another.

I Am From the Future

Riding the highway

The salesmanest of salesmen

The war just ended

I'll explain this to you slowly

For the very last time

They're called advertisements

They entice us to buy

Introducing them was a *process*

For instance

To make the sandwich boards

To which I yoked

Certain unlucky citizens

I had to first invent the sandwich

I Am From the Future

Life without pipes
is not life. This is not a

pipe. It’s a rose
about a rose about a poem

about a pipe. Now here come I

with my bag of inventions
charioting through

the time/space continuum

fiddling with the buttons
on my coat. I did not invent

the wayward air here.

Sometimes
a life is just a pipe.

I Am From the Future

I need an aspirin. I need an aspirin so badly,
though I don’t even think they work.
To crush up and snort, maybe. The one
thing I didn’t tell you in the whole entire book,
the bicycle-with-two-flat-tires century,
is what it’s like think among you,
you who are so very young.

It’s impossible.
As a split atom, a split atom, a bomb.

The Darkest Night Is History

Laid are the wires

The infrastructure

Begged them to

On the corner

Of the kitchen counter and

The egg counter and

The news ticker

And *intuitively*

Tonight will be artificial

If the cord fits

It only gets brighter from here

Words of Wisdom

New in town

New to the concept of

New in town

What's a technology

Anyway

Technology is a fork

The visiting poet said

I thought he meant metaphorically

Later it came to me

He meant *even forks*

After the Drawings of Emmeline Grangerford

"They was different from any pictures I ever see before—blacker, mostly than is common."

– Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Shall I Never See Thee More Alas

When finally I could speak I begged for black,
bonnet string to boot-toe. Sitting in the graveyard
waiting be taken, I memorized
death-dates carved on tombs. No one came to cry.

Weeping willow on a pillow,
gondola grounded in Oklahoma,
I asked the moon to go inside its canyons.
I asked the moon to swallow itself in the sky.

And when it did—

still I did not die.
Where was the death I was promised,
the heartless ticking I *know* I knew

before my life began?

And Art Thou Gone Yes Thou Art Gone Alas

Teacher called me to the chalkboard
nonce equations lay horizontal:: the long day ::
across father's lap
as he beat us every night :: Mother weeping softly
nightly as he fucked her / I
strained
to hear the sound.
In front of the class I found I could not speak.

*

When I was born, as I traveled through Mother,
Father went outside and shot a deer.
The soul of the deer flew to Heaven
and St. Peter pushed it down. Teacher,

the word for what happened there is *Ejected*.

I Shall Never Hear Thy Sweet Chirrup More Alas

A girl I used to sew with sang the Lord forgives.
I think I pushed her down a well. I think
I pushed her down the well of my mind, I can't
remember. The Lord forgives and gives and gives
and so for what, for what, for so and so, and so
for what I do not know. Did I say no? I meant
I will not tell. Here I am, Lord, sitting on the pew
next to Father, his erection just visible.

[Unfinished]

Lord, why did Mother go so frequently to town
for more supplies?
She came back with a sharpened piece of charcoal
and then my life began
in my hand and my hand drew a hole
in which I spent the night.
It touched another time and place. It was all a big mistake
and I liked it.
I found out about Orpheus
and don't look back.
I saw neon and gay men and
needle-drugs and v-necks.

Mother went to town
for more supplies
and came back with another man's love.
She told me while I was sleeping

Fucking
means finding the hole in what you want.

I ripped the moon.
I asked the moon

to go and so

it vanished into its canyons

but the canyons raged like a faceful of acne,

and, bubbling,

they grew the moon anew.

As you say, Mother—

I put my brothers to sleep.

My brothers I set them down

then tried to rip with secrets

but they saw me coming

and shut their minds.

My own mind opened like a chest on a barber's table.

Thus I fucked my very self, Teacher,

over around and through.

Down the well the little girl

I do not remember I pushed my Father Nothing

to cry about—there's plenty of water there

Hardly no one held me even the arms of the law

At breakfast Father what have you done

*

They put flowers on my grave.

They cover my drawings with cloth.

They look for me in the sky.

Look down below, Mother.

Come down here and get me.

CHAPTER 5:

BORDER STORIES

California Hallway, c. 1940

In the winter room behind the on-the-rocks jangle of a brisk splash of family and a few dashes of the recently departed, stirred, jazz is playing. Rock'n'roll doesn't exist yet, but sex and drugs are well-established.

The balcony's French doors are open. The loose, unseasonably warm night is swinging around out there, the age is blowing in. *Decorating is eliminating.* The hardest part is done. You'll just keep doing better and better until you die.

No one's outside.

No one will ever be outside.

Trinkets

Some night this month I dreamed that I saw a flaming sword in the sky and called some company to see it but before they could come it was disappeared, and about a week after my wife and I were walking and we discovered in the clouds a shining cloud exactly in the shape of a dart and seemed to be over my plantation but it soon disappeared likewise. ...God avert His judgment from this poor country.

—*The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover*

She can turn herself inside out.

At school she has shown an assembled group how she can flip her eyes around, the tomato backsides facing out and the familiars facing in. One of the boys cries every time, and she likes it.

But flipping her entire self is different. She doesn't do it intentionally. The first time, on her bed, she had been thinking with a method that she tries not to use, but that she incessantly returns to, humming back like a bee to an open Coke. She is not disturbed by the thoughts it brings, but by the way the method affects her. It leads her too far away. When she returns she doesn't return entire, and what she has lost of herself is unrecoverable.

She was lying on her bed when she first did it. Her knees were bent, pointed toward her sister's bunk. From those places she told herself not to go, she *reversed*—down to the sounds she made to herself. She didn't see it in any mirror, but felt it in the

nowhere of her heart, thumping without basis, her loose mind trying any angle, the raw touch of her inner skin ruining the sheets.

She trembled on the wrong side of herself, until finally her big toe came uncurled, and, working it with her brain, she peeled her skin back on like deciding not to eat a banana.

A true disaster, tragedy, is something that cannot happen, and to be saddled with explaining it to yourself, condoning its reality afterward and on. She has endured insideouthood several times since, once a week or more. Chunks of herself fall away. She is merely a memory of who she was before it started happening.

For example—Out walking the property, with his nasty hunting dogs on leather leashes, the hand with which he grips the leashes was thick brown leather, too. He had ropes, straps, hooks, strips, chaps, a sack strapped round his shoulder. He leaned heavy on his humorous, lighthearted self-conception at banquets and meetings and in letters both personal and official. But ever on the heels of that lightheartedness, the authority he demanded. It was evident in the angle at which he holds his pen, the murmur of his heel against the floor.

He looks up at the sky. In wonder. He is a little bit of a scientist, with a few patents to his name. The world is yet empty enough to invent new necessary elements. He drinks his drink, he does his dance. On the other side of his life is another life and he is not ashamed; he calls it his secret. He doesn't bother to ask God for permission for that or anything. There are countless ways to get to Heaven. All these exercises he developed and perfected for a longer life, all these gifts and treats for which he forgives his household how little they thank him, as know not better. He does it every morning, the dance.

For days, a spun-cotton-looking cloud has seemed to settle itself above the final hut-like cabin at the very edge of the slave quarters. He walked out there to try to see it, but gained no further confidence on the matter. Even having walked all the way out there, then standing in the altered atmosphere of the Negro village gazing at the sky, he found he brought himself no closer to it. The heavenly mass held no finite shape, adding and subtracting wisps from elsewhere; but it remained recognizable to him, however it presented itself. Perusing the sky, he hoped not to see the cloud even as his eye sought it out, like a carbuncle or rash on his neck, or a gash on a strong Negro.

When he finished his morning gruel, he stood at the door that opened to his back porch. His foolish but adorable wife often sat there until the light failed with a slave or two, fixing this or that. Their needles and yarn were laid away in baskets. Beyond the porch, his life's work, the dividing line between North Carolina and Virginia. He looked over the wide, sacred acres. In his peripheral vision, he could see the cloud.

She flips back into where her preexisting earthly responsibilities hound her. She needs to go to her uncle to get Mom weed. She was supposed to do it Monday at the latest, and it's Friday. Getting that weed is the first thing she thinks of when she wakes up. Mom is barely speaking to her, except to say she won't go to work tonight if she doesn't get the weed. There's no if. She has to do it.

There is so much more to life than living it. The untold, never unfolded. Her duty to get the weed and her unselfed existence wrap together and whip apart like the dizzy wind decorations some people put outside their trailers.

Everything is a trailer. She and her sister and Mom live in a trailer. School is seven trailers with their butts and necks wedged randomly against each other, like hot pets on a floor. Her dad, alive in Florida, no doubt spends his days in a trailer.

She puts a silver sheath of PopTarts in her backpack, and she and her sister leave for school.

There is a radio mounted to her handlebars. She stole it from a motorcycle, unscrewing it with her fingernails while its just-passing-through owner was in the bathroom of the gas station. She keeps it loud, noise-disturbance-level, so Virginia can hear, too, even when one of them rides far ahead.

It's the Friday News Round-Up. The channel comes in loud and clear for half the ride, then, after they cross a certain streetlight, it fuzzes up and they switch to Country. She likes the News, listening to people she will never meet talk in great depth about people she has never heard of. *Tuning in to tune out*, as her dad used to say.

There are frequent callers who decry the state of things. A woman who says she's a teacher in the sort-of city 50 miles east, who talks about her students.

She and Virginia are only a year apart in age, but they are not close. They hardly ever have conversations. Most of the words they exchange regard logistics. She wishes her sister would get the weed, but that's not an option. Virginia hates their uncle even more than Mom does, and doesn't owe her any favors.

Their older sister died in a crash on the highway. A cross with notes and flowers once marked the site, but it's not there anymore.

When they get to school, they throw their bikes in the dust like knights casting down their swords. They take their seats in separate regions of the back row. She has never participated in class, not even in the good old days of first and second grade.

Before that, she can remember. Better than her own yesterday, she can remember the elaborate bowing and curtsying rituals among the squires of kings and queens, everyone primed—excited, almost—to be offended. And when he came over on the ship,

the cousin of the uncle of the grandmother of her dad's dad's dad's dad's dad's dad's dad's dad, a bootmaker not a Puritan, was unmoved listening to the governor pin God's will to their *errand into the wilderness*. The numb stars quivered, brighter than any day. He threw his heavy forearm over his temple to shield his eyes, but still he woke with headaches so strong he hoped it was the sign of something fatal.

Slowly, she eats her PopTarts. She doesn't bother to separate the two "pastries," as the big box they come in optimistically refers to them. She just ducks into the wrapper and bites what she finds there. She chews with her mouth open. Her teacher considers this yet another of her endless demonstrations of defiance. He has told them numerous times that he allows no eating in class. He wears wire-rimmed glasses and has a strong belief in God, which he incorporates into his lessons. He is a card-carrying member of an evangelizing church set up in a storefront in a slightly larger town 20 miles away. He doesn't live in that town, but he travels there for services. It is his third year as a teacher, but he still worries about how to fill up the long days in the long room, which is too hot no matter what the season. The students only leave for an hour a day, to go to Physical Sciences in the trailer called Science I. He loves it when they go to Physical Sciences. In the morning, when he puts his hand on the doorknob, always three minutes late, he can hear the runtish, functionally illiterate young men and women running wild behind it. He asks the Lord to give him strength.

She doesn't have an opinion about him. As she sits in the classroom trailer day after day, her thoughts don't touch on him. She doesn't know what they're supposed to be studying, doesn't have an opinion about godliness, or about God. In previous classrooms, teachers sometimes accidentally marked her absent even as they looked right at her. She has never asked anybody to change the channel on the radio or TV, or to turn off the light or the fan. She isn't meek, she simply takes for granted that not a soul exists

who would lift a finger to assist her. She would be more likely to saw her hand off her arm than to raise it in class. School, like a broken shopping cart, slows and sticks, refusing to move, then jerks forward, too fast to control. So goes a day, a week, a year.

Sometimes, Virginia hangs out with friends after school, but today the sisters ride back home together. From the white dusty outdoors, they drip inside. It's as dark in the trailer as a bear's den.

Nothing's on the news, not anything. Their mom doesn't turn from the TV. They march into their room with their backpacks and shoes on.

Virginia swings down her backpack on the floor and climbs onto her bunk to talk on her duck phone to her friend. There is also a pay-as-you-go flip phone that she and Virginia share but rarely use. She doesn't even know where it is.

She wants to move unconnected, or like a girl in a tale, with one specific desire pulling her through. Her voice, her actions, her prints on the road, are small, but the disorganized variety of assignments and assignations from her life, and the lives before, surround her. They wake her up in the morning and lie with her at night.

Her sheets are rumpled, untouched from when she woke up. She arranges them a little, then goes out to get the weed. This time she means it. All he does is hug her and kiss her on the mouth, and he doesn't do it every time. He is known for worse, and she knows that many men are known for worse than what he's known for. It is hardly anything, but it feels as though there is less air to breathe the closer she gets to having to see him. She often checks the pink-camouflage-patterned tin box where the weed is, hoping Mom has miraculously reduced her usage and just forgot to mention it.

Her uncle lives far past the last dregs of town. She turns on her bike radio before she gets on the road, to let Mom and Virginia know she's leaving. She tunes it to

Country, the stronger signal. She doesn't want a second of silence or static on the road alone.

On the radio are songs and stories of lives of humor and passion. Mom's stepbrother, who died years ago, used to tell her of the great adventures he had in Alaska and Montana and other places she didn't believe he'd been. Everything he did made a story, *strong personalities* he met at the bar, a woman he saw on the *side of the road*, a mean waitress at a truck stop who was actually a *movie star doing research for a role*. He drove a dented green hatchback with an airstream trailer attached to it. He had flagged the trailer with bumper stickers. *Coexist. Envision Whirled Peas.* She didn't tell Mom and her sisters how skeptical she was about his stories. They believed him.

Her radio fires past the line of pines fencing the road, deep into the squares of lime-green fields beyond. It is too easy to travel from where her body is used to being. After the last named trailer park, three solo trailers, each half a mile apart or more, a fruit stand, then miles of flat and empty road.

People aren't the stories they serve to each other, the hot and drippy forkfuls. *Story of my life*, they say sarcastically on TV. But, really, what would be the story? She listens closely to herself, the sniffs and pushing sounds she makes behind her face as she rides her bike; how she blocks the breath to her nose when she walks into the bathroom at school. A pair of yellow pants have been sitting in Mom's sewing machine for at least ten years. They have witnessed no story. Worry holding hands with worry, random ejaculations of emotion every several months or so, the microwave beeping.

The last landmark before her uncle's is a three-story house that, according to its sign, is a gas station/casino/nail salon/Mexican restaurant. He once told her he gets his necessities there. He told her he tries to live off the grid. His trailer, which isn't exactly a trailer but a large rectangular utility shed, is on a little bit, just a hair, a hangnail, of a

friend's land. That friend doesn't know he lives there, and the friend will never know, because the friend is dead.

From across the field, her uncle's trailer looks like a gingerbread house. The long grass laps at her wheels. It props up her bike at an outer-space-y angle when she sets it down.

The door is open. Her uncle isn't in the front, where the TV and futon are, and she doesn't want to call to him. He has told her she's not allowed in the back, behind a collection of three-paneled vinyl screens. She is left to imagine it. There are clusters of rusty pennies on the floor in what he calls the public area. Maybe there are dimes or nickels behind the screens, or the shrunken heads of dictators. She doesn't hear any noise, but his boots are lying capsized by the door.

She sits on the futon to wait for him. She sits there for a long time. She even falls asleep for a few minutes. Her life hasn't been folded in half, into a before and after, by her ability to turn herself inside out. It's the opposite—the divisions between things have been sanded away. At the center of the horror, she has learned to relax; or else she would have no self at all. When she has tried to confront it directly, bits of the self she is in this lifetime have shot off, like splinters from a log cut with a chainsaw. Her eyes are fixed to her uncle's TV, but she doesn't register what's on. Maybe she's been turning herself inside out her whole life and has just started paying attention. As she thinks about her individual history, she perceives branches and the shadows of branches. It is impossible to isolate herself among the lives of other people.

Her teacher walks in. He of the wire-rimmed glasses and storefront church.

She looks at him and the force of her gaze brings a wind that knocks off his white cowboy hat. He bought it many years ago, but this is the first time has worn it outside his home. Like a seasoned criminal, she doesn't say his name or discernibly acknowledge

prior acquaintance. He feels slightly insane as he bends down to pick up the hat. He stands up again so quickly that he gets a terrible head rush, but what is he going to do, put his hands on his knees and wail? No, he needs to get out of there. Inside a pellicle of lines and stars, he exits the shed, gets back in his truck, and drives away.

Her uncle won't come and it's time to go home. Fearsome hypotheses gather around her. She swats them off. She doesn't try to get to the bottom of things. She can tear deeper, through the magazine thinness, the bottom's arbitrary surface, decipher tags and ties that other people vilipend. She has found terrifying souvenirs in her jacket and in the front pockets of her shorts. A moldy teacake, a silk button, a vial of poison—from the drawers of defunct countries' manor houses' front-hall lowboys. Slipping in her hand to meet each new trinket, she always already has a bad feeling before she even knows what it is. There is so much reality to endure. First plucking the very tip of it, like a playing card or pen far underneath a truck seat, her mind then grabs hold of it and admits it. Another sign arrived from elsewhere.

On the road back to the highway, she doesn't think about the teacher. It is evening, a verb. The earth is dark early and the sky is unfolding itself to match.

When he runs her over, it isn't only her. The seventy lives or more inside her, which have been continuing for centuries, end. He dries the spring from which she was drinking, cuts the power line.

Now all those people are less than dead. Mom and Virginia, even in their grief, have no inkling. No one in their world knows the story.

She might have wanted it that way.

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When it is dreamed, the real flourishes like a garden.

—Rikki Ducornet, “The Practice of Obscurity”

He lived in a city that doesn’t exist. Substantive trash—tractor tires, the skeleton of a yesteryear truck—was planted in the frontyards, and he liked it. The sci-fi-green plastic cups that came free with the copyrighted 1,000-calorie alcoholic drink enjoyed by visiting conference-goers and bachelor party attendees traced arcs on pavement 20 miles from place of sale. A subtle bar buzzed at the end of every street, unclear to even its owners whether it was closed or open. There, men hunched over beers—empty now, now full—like great mountains borne above tributaries. They had seen it done so on TV. Women, too. Screaming into each other’s concert-worn ears, or smoking like the occupation it used to be.

He rolled down boulevards of shotgun houses. Inside, America was throbbing, dinner on the table, back from war, hanging the laundry from the line, momma he proposed, out with the boys, turn on the teevee, I just don’t know we can afford this, darlin get me a beer, will someone answer the phone, tough day at work, not in this house, Honey Just Allow Me Once More Chance, I’ve Been Loving You Too Long (To Stop Now).

Nights when the sky was only pretending to sleep, its blurry backlit purple as bright in its way as a baby blue day, he parked and walked through the miniature streets. Overgrown greenery formed a constant canopy above him. The asphalt was spongy underneath his step. He could rip it if he wanted to and journey to the center of the earth. Everything was wet and changeable. Please, Please, Don’t Make Me Stop Now.

Border Songs: On Americo Paredes

Deep, deep down, in the southern-most part of South Texas is the city of Brownsville. This is the land of U.S. Border Patrol, threats of deportation, endless ranches, endless dry brush. Brownsville is 70 miles south of Falfurrias, Texas, home of the Border Patrol-operated traffic checkpoint that, according to an article in the *New York Times* late last year, "apprehends the largest number of people that have entered the country illegally—14,243 from October 2014 to August [2015]." Brownsville is also the land of Americo Paredes, a multilingual folklorist whose work focuses on recording and conveying the sounds, sights, and textures of life on the Texas-Mexican border. Paredes used a wide variety of forms, from lyric poetry to academic tome. He died in 1999, but many of his best books mix genre and form in such innovative ways that they recall some of the twenty-first century's more experimental creative writers.

Before this goes any further, you should probably know a couple things about your messenger: I have no social media accounts and I live in Louisiana. Which is to say, I can hardly locate my own pulse, let alone put my finger on the culture's. But I have thought of Paredes often of late as I have watched Republican presidential candidates spar over immigration reform, a term that can serve as both shorthand and euphemism for politicians' focus on those who transgress the border from Mexico to the United States without permission. The Texas-Mexico border is a current hot-button topic, a scene of national anxiety, but Paredes's work, which often includes pointed social messages about how and why certain peoples are excluded from participation in mainstream American culture, shows that a collective anxiety has found its subject at that same border before. This is one among many reasons that Paredes seems (to my admittedly untuned ear) primed for popularity among contemporary readers. Additionally, there is increased

interest of late in hybrid-genre books like Paredes'. Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, a dossier of prose, poetry, and images about the often casual cruelty that accompanies being black in "historically white spaces," was nominated for the 2014 National Books Critics' Circle Award in two categories, criticism and poetry, winning the latter category. The popular and critical success of *Citizen* seems due in part to how the text navigates and encompasses multiple genres. Reading it, I thought, again, of Paredes. And so I keep expecting Paredes to be discovered by a nonacademic audience, or at least by creative writers; for a well-known contemporary writer to call wider attention to Paredes and his work.

So why hasn't that happened? Paredes, writes the literary scholar and cultural theorist Jose Limon (whose 1994 work cultural theory/autobiography *Dancing With the Devil*, dedicated to Paredes, is a genre-transgressing masterpiece), is "the leading Mexican-American scholar/intellectual/creative writer of our time." All those slashes are telling—and they might be why you might have not heard of him. It is possible that the very disciplinary and generic boundaries that Paredes exploded in his writing are responsible for his lack of notoriety.

Paredes taught folklore, English Literature, and anthropology for decades at the University of Texas at Austin, the same institution where he had received his doctoral degree. His hybrid-genre books are interspersed among more traditionally conceived scholarship, making it easy to consider him, particularly from a distance, as a capital-S scholar, not a public intellectual, not a journalist, musician, novelist, or poet—despite his having been all that and more. A good number of Paredes's publications are not of interest to a general audience. However, his practice of boundary-pushing and -breaking, and his unwillingness to accept the given definitions of racial identity or genre, foreground a huge swath of contemporary literature.

Paredes is a foundational figure in a tradition of books that combine literary and critical theory, fiction, poetry, memoir, and folklore to express hybrid cultural and ethnic identities. His hybrid methods suggest *surplus*—too much to say, having waiting too long to say it. Although Paredes is not a familiar name among creative writers, his stylistic and intellectual influence runs deep. Writing in and against Paredes's example, Gloria Anzaldua, author of the work of critical theory/poetry/memoir *Borderlands*/La Frontera, kickstarted a Chicana feminist movement that has included Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, and Julia Alvarez. These writers, like Paredes, are fluent in multiple languages, discourses, and genres, and tend to combine them in unexpected ways. Paredes variously influenced and prefigured what scholar Christopher Douglas calls the "literary multiculturalism" of contemporary masters like Toni Morrison, N. Scott Momaday, and Ishmael Reed.

There isn't a typical America Paredes book, genre, or style. *With His Pistol In His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (1958), Paredes's best-known book, is exemplary of his extraordinary range as a scholar/intellectual/creative writer, to use Limon's formulation. The book fuses classic academic balladry scholarship, lyric storytelling, cultural ethnography, and journalistic recovery work—all by looking closely at a single folksong, "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez." Some of Paredes's other important academic folklore books include *Towards New Perspectives in Folklore* (1972, with Richard Bauman), *A Texas-Mexican 'Cancionero': Folksongs of the Lower Border* (1976), *Folklore and Culture on the Texas Mexican Border* (1993), and dozens of academic studies of Mexican, American, and Mexican-American folklore, written in both Spanish and English. In essays like "The Folk Base of Chicano Literature" (1979) and "The Problem of Identity in a Changing Culture" (1993), Paredes uses his interdisciplinary perspective to assert beyond doubt that, as Audre Lorde says, poetry is not a luxury.

Looking at daily life, folklore, and literature, Paredes cannot help but see the vital links between them that most of us miss entirely.

Even before receiving his bachelor's degree at the nontraditional age of 35, Paredes was writing and publishing in English and Spanish. His multiple volumes of poetry began with *Cantos de andolescencia* (1937), published in Mexico when he was 22. Much of his fiction and poetry Paredes wrote before returning to school and, eventually, taking a professorship. Most of those creative works did not see publication until decades after they were written. During his first year as a professor, Paredes tossed off a novel just for a shot at a $500 prize being offered. He won it. The novel *George Washington Gomez* (1990), which Paredes wrote between 1935 and 1940 then stashed in a drawer for 50 years, the scholar Shelley Fishkin Fisher now calls among "the most important works in twentieth-century American literature."

Within all this literary variety, Paredes wasn't so much an experimentalist as a pragmatist. He *had* to write, so he wrote, genre be damned. He wasn't trying to find his voice or his story; he already had his story. Born in 1915, Paredes grew up on the Texas side of the Texas-Mexico border, where the distinctions between the two cultures and their languages were sometimes indiscernible, and sometimes as loud as a rifle blast. In the Paredeses' Spanish-speaking household, Mexican traditions were upheld; meanwhile, at the mostly-white public schools Paredes attended, lessons were in English and often conveyed cruel stereotypes about Mexican-Americans. By the time he enrolled in the doctoral program at Austin, he was already pushing 40. He was no gull fresh out of undergrad hoping to hop on the tenure-line gravy train. To attend graduate school, he had left a successful journalistic career that included covering war crimes trials in Tokyo and working as a PR man for the Red Cross. He had fought as an infantryman in World War II. Through it all, he encountered racism of many varieties—paid lower wages for the

same work, overlooked by educators, passed over for promotions. When he entered academe's Old Boys Network in the early 1950s, he had long been awake to truths that even most of his professors were not ready to acknowledge.

The Texas-Mexico border that Paredes spent his life writing about, from his youth through his years as an emeritus professor, was both under- and over-imagined. It was a site of mythic battles between good guys and bad guys. It was also a site of a people, Americans of Mexican heritage, that went unrecognized in the country in which they putatively belonged. The awkward subtitle of *George Washington Gomez: A Mexicotexan Novel* speaks to the situation Paredes was dealing with. He wrote before words like Chicano/a, Latina/o, and Hispanic had cultural or academic currency. As he wrote, he summoned his experience and that of his "folk" into the official culture.

Paredes shares with contemporary experimental writers like Rankine a willingness to let his content determine his form. However, *George Washington Gomez* is more reminiscent of Naturalist door-stoppers of the early twentieth century by Theodor Dreiser and Edith Wharton than Rankine's slim *Citizen*. Even more than Dreiser or Wharton, *George Washington Gomez* reminds me of Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, published in 1934, the year before Paredes began his novel. Roth's and Paredes's protagonists both travel the unmarked middle ground between hero and anti-hero, adrift in multiples cultures and languages. Roth's David speaks a Yiddish at home that is entirely separate from the dialects that surround him in his life outside; inside his consciousness, meanwhile, he is another person altogether. The coming-of-age of Paredes's George Washington Gomez, or Gualinto, as he is known by everyone, is mediated at every turn by issues of culture, community, and belonging.

George Washington Gomez is the story of Gualinto's childhood and young adulthood in the lower class barrio of Jonesville-on-the-Grande, a substitution for the

Brownsville of Paredes's youth. (Jonesville-on-the-Grande is also the setting of many of the short stories in Paredes's *The Hammon and the Bean*.) Paredes sets Gualinto's story in a broader context, including the failed uprising by South Texan *seiciosos* in 1915, the Great Depression (or *La Chilla*), segregation, and World War II. As Gualinto comes into self-consciousness, suffers and recovers from a serious illness, enters school, endures bullying, makes friends, finds and loses love, and works his first job, he is affected, often deeply, by the turbulence of the economic and social landscape that mark the early twentieth century.

Some of the most formally compelling passages in *George Washington Gomez* are about *La Chilla*. Departing from Gualinto's story, Paredes zooms out for a long chapter, providing pointed, but often lyrical, social critique. The Depression took its time getting to the Rio Grande Valley, particularly its poorest residents, Mexican-American farmworkers. Such laborers, Paredes writes,

> could not imagine a state of things where he would be poorer than he already was. He heard about the people of Oklahoma, who were leaving their land, getting on their trucks and going west. To the Mexicotexan laborer, anybody who owned a truck was rich. He heard of some sharecropper families who had nothing to eat but flour and bacon. The Mexican laborer, who had subsisted on tortillas most of his life, wondered how people who could afford biscuits and bacon could be poor.

There is cutting social critique throughout the rest of the novel, as well. For example, driving home after being turned away from a high school event at a Mexican-themed club that, it turns out, has a no-Mexicans policy, one of Gualinto's classmates tells a story: "When I was in fifth grade I wrote a theme once, in geography class. About the population of Texas. And I said, 'Texas is a very big state with very little people.' The teacher took off five points for that. She said it was bad diction."

Like the greatest, longest novels of Naturalist literature—Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* (1913), Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925)—*George Washington Gomez* is addicting, messy, intense, and weird. Gualinto has some of the charisma of Mark Twain's Huck Finn, and is, like Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, deeply formed by his social conditions. But Gualinto resists the sense of icon-hood that often attaches to literary characters even as we read them for the first time. Told by his mother and uncle that he is special, better, destined to be a leader of his people, Gualinto, as a little boy, rallies. "Just wait till I'm a man! I'll get our land back. I'll be like Gregorio Cortez," he tells his uncle. Cortez, the *corrido*, or ballad, hero that Paredes writes about in *With His Pistol in His Hand*, looms over Gualinto as a model for Mexican-American manhood. By his teenage years, though, Gualinto seethes against that prescription. Gualinto knows what his family, and his more optimistic friends, take much longer to grasp: He just isn't that great a guy. He is smart but not clever, petty, selfish, spoiled; in other words, Gualinto is a man, not a hero. The cultural critic William Nericcio has designated the "fertile, intoxicating terrain of Americo Paredes [as] the domain of ethnic American self-loathing." So Gualinto isn't Gregorio Cortez. As an "ethnic American," why should he be denied the self-loathing that drips from our warming surfaces, invades our native arts, buttresses the defensive sounds of our favorite sitcoms?

As Gualinto sinks into despair, threatening to drop out of high school during a family crisis, his (red-haired) friend El Colorado tries to inspire him. El Colorado talks for pages—like Juan, he seems to have long held his story inside.

> "What if my father don't know how to read? I know how, don't I? What if my mother don't even know what an account is? I know what an account is, and I want to be one. And I'm going to be one, whatever it costs me. I'll show these bastards!" He stopped, exhausted and hoarse from the longest speech he had ever

> made to anyone in his life, and he looked at Gualinto with a timid expression on his big, freckle-splotched face as if the baring of these inner thoughts of his had somehow made him vulnerable. Gualinto looked at him admiringly. The red-head was a better man than himself. 'He could really have done something great," he thought. 'He's the kind of guy I should have been.' He tried to say it but the words stuck in his throat. Instead he said, "You're a fighter, I'm a coward.'"

Gualinto takes a few cracks at love throughout the novel. He tries, in this passage, to love his good friend as El Colorado deserves to be loved. But Gualinto doesn't seem to have it in him. In the space between fighter and coward, of course, is where real life takes place. Although Gualinto has renounced the *corridos* of his childhood, they cast their shadows over him: In his self-pity, he sees a world of only good vs. evil, fighters vs. cowards.

In his studies of folklore, Paredes shows how Gualinto might have developed such a mindset. Paredes analyzes how everything from *corridos* to jokes shape our experience of the world. He seeks fact with a journalist's rigor, then interrogates his findings with a poststructuralist's cynicism.

This is particularly true in *With His Pistol in His Hand*. Paredes submitted *With His Pistol in His Hand* as his doctoral thesis 1954, and the University of Texas-Austin Press published it as a book four years later. The book centers on Paredes's study of "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez," a popular *corrido* in Mexican ranching communities in the Rio Grande Valley. The ballad is of unknown authorship, but Paredes traces its first performances to the summer of 1901, weeks after the real-life Gregorio Cortez Lira shot and killed a Texas sheriff in self-defense and, for several days, outran and outwitted hundreds of racist, blood-thirsty Texas Rangers before finally surrendering, under renegotiated and more humane terms. As a common variant of the ballad ends,

> Then said Gregorio Cortez,

With his pistol in his hand,

"Ah, so many mounted Rangers

Just to take one Mexican!"

With His Pistol in His Hand is a book as hybrid as the culture it describes. The book is divided into two parts, its first part something of an ethnography—a cultural and historical introduction to border life, as if to say, you cannot begin to understand "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez" without knowing the people who sing it. In the book's "Part One," Paredes combines the twice-told and the never-mentioned, devoting a chapter to Cortez the legend, and a chapter to the Cortez the man, using court records, letters, and interviews to reconstruct a history that most official sources had done their best to erase or control.

Even the materials Paredes worked from testify to the racist, Anglo-centric history and practices of Border life. The sources he cites include newspaper reports that refer to Cortez as the "arch fiend." Much of the history of the border he pieces together relies not on published accounts, but on other University of Texas students' masters theses, for the simple reason that there *were* no published accounts from which to draw. The folklore scholar Marilyn Motz has defined folklore as "fugitive knowledge." I thought of that definition often as I read *With His Pistol in His Hand*, and not just because it is literalized as Paredes details Cortez's flight from the law in life and legend. Michel Foucault famously characterized our age as one in which the truth itself matters less than does the *status* of the truth. *With His Pistol in His Hand* is a book about how struggles over the status of truth affects real peoples' real lives. If the things you know are considered "fugitive" rather than "official," what does that suggest about *who* you are?

Before Cortez was memorialized as lore, he was a person, just like anybody else, eating meals and resting with his wife on the porch. On June 12, 1901, the day that

Cortez ended up leaving his house forever, Paredes writes,

> He had just finished the noon meal and was lying full length on the floor of the front gallery of his house…, his head on his wife's lap. Sitting outside with them were his mother, his brother Romaldo, and Romaldo's wife. The children were inside, still eating. It was hot and clear; the corn was tall and promised a good harvest. There was cause to be contented. It was at that moment that Sheriff Morris appeared looking for horse thieves.

"There is much variation in oral accounts concerning Cortez's personal appearance," Paredes reports, sifting through the descriptions he has collected from people for whom Gregorio Cortez is a household name. Paredes notes that "as the story moves farther away from fact into legend, the narrator identifies himself personally with Cortez." As the legend of Cortez circulated, the often-ignored people living on this often-ignored Border took the opportunity to tell their own stories—to place their lives within legend. "A short, very dark man told me that Cortez had been just a little dark man, *chiquitito y prietito.* Ah, but what a man!" Paredes writes; meanwhile, "The variant according to which Gregorio is a field hand was given to me by laboring people." Paredes's goal in the first section of *With His Pistol in His Hand* seems not so much to record lore, or even to bring to light the facts behind the legend. Instead, in the many glimpses it offers of Mexican-American life at a certain time and place—from lying peacefully on the front porch at noon to the importance of masculinity and manhood—this unclassifiable book hints at the vistas of peoples that have fallen from the official record. And at all those who were never on the record in the first place. Paredes shows that Cortez's story was circulated, and ascended into lore, even as it was unfolding. The alacrity with which that transformation took place suggests how "fugitive" or "unofficial" peoples construct the sense of cultural significance that mainstream culture withholds from them.

The second section of the book is about the song itself, “The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez,” with a history of the Border *corrido* form, variants of the ballad in English and Spanish, and line-for-line analyses in which Paredes carbon-dates the variants, CSI-style, based on how and when their performers would have received the information that each variant includes.

Paredes’s books are full of images of father figures passing down lore. Paredes’s dedication to *With His Pistol in His Hand* is in the form of a poem:

> To the memory of my father
> who rode a raid or two with
> Catarino Garza;
> and to all those old men
> who sat around on summer nights,
> in the days when there was
> a chaparral, smoking their
> cornhusk cigarettes and talking
> in low, gentle voices about
> violent things;
> while I listened.

As Limon points out, the poetic form of these words signals that “this is no conventional dedication, and what follows is no conventional book.” Paredes’s practice of writing lyric poems as dedications to academic books is an initiation into his expansive way of thinking about discipline and genre. Here, a lyric statement about oral storytelling frames an academic study. I don’t think Paredes would see anything strange about that.

In *George Washington Gomez*, peoples’ stories, although they have never told them to anyone before, come bursting out of them, overlong and fully formed, like the

adult-shaped babies in Renaissance paintings. Toward the end of the novel, Juan, the stolid farmhand of George's uncle Feliciano, reveals to Gualinto with surprising alacrity some key information. "Juan talked for a long time, longer than he had talked to anyone in years. When he finished he sighed and said, 'I have been wanting to tell you all this for months now. I'm glad I did.'" One gets the sense that nearly all the characters in the novel, from George's slightly unhinged mother, Maria, to his pretentious former schoolmate Francisco, are itching for the space and audience to tell their personal histories, having been un-listened-to most of the lives. Like Paredes, they have their stories. They merely lack an audience.

Paredes makes mincemeat, throughout his work, of the long tradition of white writers, like J. Frank Dobie and Walter Prescott Webb, who wrote romanticized histories of Texas that cast the Texas Rangers in the role of courageous good guys. The studies of Mexican-American communities that they claimed to have put pain-staking effort into, Paredes, and, later Limon and other show, are merely a bunch of racialized misunderstandings, assumptions, and guesses. In other words, fiction. Further, historians and folklorists like Dobie and Webb promoted their own reputations and fame by exploiting the racist expectations of their general and academic audiences. In *Dancing with the Devil*, Limon shares the awful factoid that Dobie encouraged people to call him Pancho, a cartoonish appropriation of the culture and language he purported to translate. In *George Washington Gomez*, Paredes lampoons Dobie in the character of K. Hank Harvey, "a local luminary" who gives a high school graduation speech to an auditorium of politely unamused Jonesville residents. Harvey, the perfect inverse of Paredes, has a readymade audience and nothing to say.

I feel a bit like Dobie or Webb, writing this. I don't even live in Texas; I live in Louisiana. Like K. Hank Harvey, the despicable Texas historian who is actually from

New York City, who studies Mexican-Americans but doesn't even bother to learn Spanish, I saved up my money to move from Chicago, where I was born and raised, to the Gulf, where it's funky and weird. I am ashamed to say I was attracted by the "authenticity" of the Southern United States. But it has not been as I expected. *I* have not been as expected. *I'm* weird here, identified by markers I would never use: a Yankee, a Jew. There is more data than I had anticipated—and less. I've been having a difficult time getting the books I need to write my dissertation. I guess you could say I have found many unfamiliar variants of those songs I loved.

I report from way down at the very bottom: There's no way to be alone in this country. It is and has always been what the scholar Mary Louise Pratt has termed a "contact zone," a place where a "we" meets a "them." Paredes laments that border ballads have hardly been studied at all, "having received to date but passing attention from the Texas folklorist and almost none at all from the Mexican ballad student." If it's not one or the other, easy to file as Southern or Western or Texan or Mexican or American, theory or history, we tend to turn away. But it's *never* one or the other, not really, not here. Paredes' writing is the best example I know of the hybrid songs we sing in America, even when we don't intend to. Even when we don't know we're singing them.

Little Novel: *Love in A Time Of Steel, Cast Iron, and Lead*

Chapter 1.

It wasn't necessary, was the way she saw it. She never put her arms around him. She noticed that he, for his part, seemed to love her only sometimes, to and fro like a tall stalk of wheat. She never mentioned it, didn't consider it her business. She didn't think of herself as powerful, but she held the funnel into which he dropped the oil that brought their lives to life.

Chapter 2.

He was a man, with America and The Way Things Work on his side. Dawn to dusk, he would have swung his hammer with the same amount of force without her, but he wanted the work he did to be for her. He wanted to take her in his arms, protect her and provide for her. He saw that she never for an instant had considered letting it be that way.

Chapter 3.

She said something in the hallway. He knew better than to respond. She didn't say much, but sometimes her words were as rough and ugly as certain early encounters he struggled to bury. He, too, rarely spoke. What passed between them wasn't silence. It was a marriage.

Chapter 4.

A decade later, she said it again. Might have said it a few times in between, he didn't remember. She had borne no children, had no brothers or sisters, no cousins or uncles or

aunts. More often nowadays, the terrible past would surge up in him like heartburn. She only made it worse.

Chapter 5.

She was always turning knobs. In the garden, at the pump, in the kitchen. She could step out of her conditions and, on her own, turn the knob that not even a man was meant to turn. Not even God. It was directly above her head. She felt the shadow it cast whenever she stood still. When she died in the night she went right toward it. She knew it had happened to her before.

Chapter 6.

Rarely had she ventured to the edge of their land, hemmed in by aboveground piping as if to mark the limits of the known world. Curved horns pointed skyward, pure animal faces, property of propane country. Her whole life had happened within the boundaries of a single state. During the Holocene, *holy recent*: wilder than any wild imagination, when the very air would tear itself apart for a show.

Chapter 7.

He stood around exhausted. Still he kept remembering, so he took another wife. He seemed different around this one, but he wasn't sure how. Like the first Americans, gnarly and fierce, he believed the future was foretold. Out on his tractor, in the long light of a late afternoon, he searched the sky for auguries of his death, but the messages were illegible from that innocent distance. He turned around and drove home.

Experimental Poetry from the Disputed Territory: Rereading Bernadette Mayer's *Midwinter Day* and Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*

When asked, at the start of a 2011 interview for the Poetry Foundation, whether she was born in Brooklyn or Queens, the poet Bernadette Mayer gives a neither/both answer. "The Disputed Territory," she says, "Brooklyn/Queens, New York," adding, "I'm honored to be part of the Disputed Territory." Perhaps Mayer's early geographical designation—or non-designation—influenced her later disregard, in both her life and work, for poetic allegiances and groupings. In anthologies and critical studies, Mayer has been variously placed with New York School, Language, and conceptual writers, a variety that in itself suggests the unclassifiable nature of her work.[1] Mayer conveys something of the discomfort with which she approaches poetic classification when, later in the same interview, she answers an inquiry about Language poetry. "I like it now that they—I shouldn't say 'they'—that they've developed a sense of humor. For a long time it was in abeyance; now it's back—well, I don't think it ever existed, but now it does" (Interview). Mayer's statement is characteristically sphinxlike, full of strong proclamations that she then half-retracts. Her self-admonishing "I shouldn't say 'they'" is followed almost immediately—and humorously—by another "they." Even if Mayer had not begun the interview saying she was from the Disputed Territory, one might know she was a native by how fluently she evades apprehension.

[1] For example, Daniel Kane, in the introduction to *Don't Ever Get Famous*, carefully distinguishes between "second-generation New York School poets like Ron Padgett and Ted Berrigan" and "Deep Image poets like Jerome Rothenberg," while placing Mayer as a writer "affiliated with Downtown performance and conceptual-art communities" (ix). However, *Don't Ever Get Famous* takes its title from Mayer's piece "Experiments," which appears in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, Bruce Andrews's and Charles Bernstein's 1984 compendium of early issues of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine. To further complicate the issue, the subtitle of Kane's edited collection is *Essays on New York Writing After the New York School*, suggesting Mayer's affiliation with yet another group: second-generation New York School poets.

The broader, albeit subtextual, question that Mayer evades in the interview might be cast as, "who is speaking?" That question I take from the title of an essay by Lyn Hejinian, whose career-long identification with Language poetry distinguishes her from Mayer but whose poetics, I will argue, shares with Mayer an adherence to ambiguity that cuts against her strict, career-long affiliation with Language poetics. In the essay "Who Is Speaking?" Hejinian examines how that question can yield to projects of self-invention and, thus, to the invention of one's gender. Here I consider the various ways in which Hejinian and Mayer address and dodge the question "who is speaking?" in two autobiographical early works, Hejinian's *My Life* (1980/87)[2] and Mayer's *Midwinter Day* (1981), in the service of creating multitudinous, contradictory, and incoherent female selves. A number of feminist anthologies, critical studies, and literary histories published since the millennium have intervened in the dominant masculinist narratives regarding Language and experimental writing in America;[3] I situate my readings of *Midwinter Day* and *My Life* within the current effort to recover what Elisabeth A. Frost and Cynthia Hogue call the "crucial cultural contexts" of women's experimental poetry (*Innovative Women Poets* 3). In attending to the work of self- and gender-invention in *Midwinter Day* and *My Life*, I argue that readings that draw attention to moments or tendencies in feminist experimental texts that are *not* feminist or *not* experimental can be in the service of more expansive, rather than critical or discrediting, attitudes toward feminist poetics.

[2] The first edition of *My Life* was published by Burning Deck Press in 1980; I use the revised version of the text, first published by Sun & Moon Press in 1987, in this essay.

[3] See critical studies including Megan Simpson's *Poetic Epistemologies* (2000), Elisabeth A. Frost's *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* (2003), Linda Kinnahan's *Lyric Interventions: Feminism, Experimental Poetry, and Contemporary Discourse* (2004), and Lynn Keller's *Thinking Poetry* (2010). Ann Vickery's feminist genealogy *Leaving Lines of Gender* (2000) provides an alternate history of Language poetry. New anthologies of experimental women's poetry include *American Women Poets in the 21st Century* (2002), edited by Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell, and *Eleven More American Women Poets* (2012), edited by Rankine and Juliana Spahr. Additionally, works written in formally experimental registers by poet-critics associated with the Language movement, like Hejinian's *The Language of Inquiry* (2000) and Joan Retallack's *The Poethical Wager* (2003), have offered feminist and woman-centric takes on a history of Language poetry that has typically been told by, and about, men.

In addition to reflecting on these two poets' contradictory selves and self-making projects, I will also consider some of the variances that surround the receptions of Hejinian and Mayer as authors. Although they are contemporaries, Mayer born in 1945 and Hejinian in 1941, Hejinian is more well-known, and much more likely to be included in assessments of contemporary experimental poetry.[4] The variance in their receptions probably has much to do with Mayer's nonparticipation as a critic and Hejinian's decades-long critical commitment to Language poetry. Hejinian is considered a foundational presence in Language writing for her contributions to its poetry and criticism and as the founder of Tuumba Press. *My Life* has been one of the bestselling books of the Language movement, if not *the* bestselling book, a modern classic of experimental poetics and "a clear candidate for academic canonization" (Samuels 103). Juliana Spahr, David Jarraway, and others—including Hejinian herself—have associated the book's formal experimentalism with the poststructuralist drive against essentialism. Meanwhile, Mayer, and *Midwinter Day*, have generally been excluded from recent histories and critical work on women's experimental and Language poetry. Mayer's Poetry Foundation questioner even prefaces the interview by describing how he recently discovered her work, referring to Mayer as a "well-kept secret." In the context of new feminist scholarship on experimental poetry, and in the spirit of Hejinian's and Mayer's own disruptive investigations into the self, I argue for readings that unsettle some of the established answers to the question of "who is speaking?" in autobiographical experimental feminist poetry.

"Like not having a room of one's own": Mayer's Day-in-the-Life Poetics

[4] For example, a chapter is devoted to Hejinian in *We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics*, edited by Laura Hinton and Hogue, which is titled after a refrain from *My Life*, and in Rankine and Spahr's anthology *American Women Poets in the 21st Century*; however, Mayer is not discussed in either book.

Mayer's "disputed" status extends to the unstable space she occupies between poet and performance artist. *Midwinter Day*, often considered her finest achievement, is an example of why she is so difficult to categorize artistically and generically. The conceit behind the book is that Mayer wrote it entirely on December 22, 1978, the shortest day of the year, balancing its composition with various other tasks she describes in the text. Those other tasks are largely domestic, related to her role as the mother of two young children. *Midwinter Day*, I argue, could be a key text of feminist experimental writing for a variety of reasons, including, rather than in spite of, its rootedness in the female domestic and the implicit connections it tends to make between a women's body and an experimental writing that is essentially female. In its refusal to offer definitive responses to the question of "who is speaking?" *Midwinter Day* could both encourage and model more expansive, open-ended methods of reading texts by experimental female writers.

Midwinter Day is related to Mayer's earlier work *Memory*, a performance piece for which Mayer attempted to record, via notes and photographs, everything she experienced during July 1971. Mayer has called *Memory* an "emotional science project" (qtd. in Vickery 151), a phrase that combines the discourses of high art and high *school*, suggesting an intervention of female subjectivity in the objective, and traditionally male-dominated, realm of science. *Memory* was also, Mayer has said, an "unrepeatable work" (qtd. in Baker).[5] Her description underscores the performative, as opposed to scientific, nature of the work (given that an actual scientific experiment is, by definition, repeatable). With *Memory*, Mayer said, "I was never trying to take beautiful photographs.

[5] The text and some photographs from the "original," 1972 gallery presentation of *Memory* were published as a book by North Atlantic Press in 1975 (and can be viewed online at the University of Utah's *Eclipse Archive*), although, as Vickery notes, "the book fails to capture the multidimensional breadth of Mayer's original project" (152).

I was trying to take as many as possible" (Lecture). According to Mayer, the intention was to "reflect what actual vision is, and not romanticize it" (qtd. in Vickery 152). Interestingly, in a 1984 letter to the Language poet Rae Armantrout, Hejinian critiques Mayer's poetry on just those grounds, suggesting that Mayer makes too much of a "romance" out of homemaking (qtd. in Vickery 159). Hejinian's charge seems to be specific to *Midwinter Day,* Mayer's epic about her home life published three years before, as opposed to Mayer's earlier projects, like *Memory.* Although *Midwinter Day* and *Memory* share procedural tactics and concern with tracking the authorial/artistic consciousness, *Memory* tracks Mayer's life and consciousness *before* they centered on the heteronormative nuclear family. The objectionable "romance" enters, for Hejinian, when Mayer's poetry reports the household. In the household, Mayer finds yet another "Disputed Territory," a space that for different women writers signifies differently.

Nearly every critic who has written about *Midwinter Day* has noted that it contains a unique admixture of dispatches from a writing life and from a life of domestic motherhood. High lyric and narrative description of the nitty-gritty of housework often compete for space within a single stanza. The presence of coexisting, sometimes competing, discourses occasions much of the speaker's ambivalence regarding her positionality as a woman writer—an ambivalence that runs through the book's six sections, which correspond to temporal periods in the day. Shifts between mother-speech and poet-speech can be lightening quick, as in the following passage: "I'm not playing. I'm cleaning though I'm crawling around. Are these dishes clean or dirty. I'm afraid not. Shit. The trees lose their leaves so you can see through them. A man and a dog in a yard. A person who doesn't have friends must explain himself to strangers" (*Midwinter Day* 36). The default "person" in the last sentence here is a man, a *him*self—which is particularly interesting given that Mayer could be seen as explaining *her*self "to

strangers" via *Midwinter Day*. Perhaps, after a few sentences of "crawling around" in the "shit," figuring out whether the "dishes [are] clean or dirty," this female speaker finds personhood beyond her immediate reach.

However, the discursive variety—and compositional method—of Mayer's autobiographical chronicle insists on a speaker/self who, like Walt Whitman, shrugs at her contradictions; she, too, contains multitudes. Megan Burns, whose article on *Midwinter Day* is probably the most comprehensive study of the text, argues, "Instead of separating the categories of child rearing and poetry, Mayer attempts to merge the two since the combination reveals a more accurate portrayal of life." The two categories are merged in that they appear side-by-side within the book, but this is a fraught merger. Rather than feeding each other, they often fight. In the above passage, the single-sentence "Shit" could be seen as an obstruction to the lyric description of fall that follows it. It also evokes the "dirt" of the dirty dishes, emphasizing the general sense of muddle here. The domestic and the poetic are pitted against each other as they compete for Mayer's attention. "We're only having spaghetti," Mayer writes (*Midwinter Day* 67). On a day in which she writes a book-length poem, dinner suffers.

Part of the formal work of the opening section of the text is its foundation of a register capable of containing such admixtures. *Midwinter Day* opens with a description of Mayer's "opening dream"—thus an implicit link is drawn between text and dream, speaker and dreamer. Mayer makes frequent reference to the *dreaminess* of her dreams—their constructed-ness and un-reality—such as when she writes, "Then I saw / The shawls of the dream as if they were the sky / And the dream's dark vests and the dream's collar and cuffs" (*Midwinter Day* 2). The word "dream" recurs three times across these two lines—casting something of a trance but also drawing a bright line between the dream-world and material reality: the repetition reminds us that *this is just a dream*.

In her essay “Strangeness,” Hejinian writes of the waking-self versus the dream-self:

> “I,” the dreamer, is not of necessity identical to the “I” of waking life. ... In dreams, the opposition between objectivity and subjectivity is a false one. In fact, the dream’s interdependence from binarisms like form-content, male-female, now-then, here-there, large-small, social-solitary, etc., is characteristic and makes polarity irrelevant or obsolete.” (142)

Mayer opens *Midwinter Day* with a “dreamer I” along the lines of Hejinian’s description, one whose logic and concerns are distinct from the “I” in the book’s five ensuing sections. In the first section of *Midwinter Day*, one “you” blends into another, with dream-logic holding sway.

“How can I be both here and there?” Mayer asks as a “dreamer ‘I’ “ (*Midwinter Day* 3). That question echoes throughout the rest of the book (even after she wakes for the day), destabilizing the operating simultaneity in which Mayer asks the reader to believe: namely, that during this day she preforms the necessary tasks of the domestic while writing an entire book. By switching between past, present, and future tenses, Mayer establishes a speaker that exists within a temporal reality that cannot be apprehended—or, perhaps, considering the putative terms of the book’s composition, believed. The multiple presences and positionalities of Mayer’s speaker allows Mayer to variously answer and refuse the question “who is speaking?”

Mayer’s speaker hesitates, dodges, and invents space to stop and think in her presentation of a subjective self. Such moments create a refrain throughout *Midwinter Day*, in lines like, “Can I say that here,” (4), “There’s something / I want to say, I don’t know how to put it” (25), and “Should I say all this?” (52). Statements of self-consciousness and self-censorship speak to, of course, *Midwinter Day*’s one-day process

and relate the text to Mayer's consciousness at the time of its composition, "as it happened." They are also suggestive of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's notion of the "anxiety of authorship," the feminist and woman-centric re-vision of Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" introduced in 1979, one year after the "midwinter day" of Mayer's poem and four years before its publication. Bloom's author, male by default, struggles to emerge from the shadows of his predecessors' genius; against this background, Gilbert and Gubar describe the female author's isolation, which results from her sense of "alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for sisterly precursors and successors, her urgent sense of her need for a female audience together with her fear of the antagonism of male readers" (50). In recent years, Gilbert and Gubar's term has come to be associated with second-wave feminism and some of its limitations, including an emphasis on the experience of the white, middle-class woman and the assumption that her experience speaks for all women. I want to recognize those limitations and their import, as well as recognizing the specific feminist contexts in which *Midwinter Day* was composed, with the goal of attending to the ways in which feminism and feminist discourses have been used by experimental women writers.

The theme of the anxiety of authorship that runs throughout *Midwinter Day* links the book to the feminism of its time and place; several passages in *Midwinter Day* suggest Mayer's engagement with Gilbert and Gubar. In one such passage Mayer lists women writers, literally writing herself into the history of female authorship. This is a book filled with lists, many of which begin by announcing themselves—for example, Mayer proposes, "Let me tell you / The titles of all the current books" (53). Mayer's list of women writers, however, seems to come out of nowhere. It emerges from slippage between Chaucer, that stalwart member of the masculinist Western canon, and an anonymous "Etruscan mother":

If only we could all get some sleep

like Chaucer

Or a Latin Sabine or Etruscan mother

Who didn't have the time, chance, education or notion

To write some poetry so I could know

What she thought about things

There are some who did anyway

There's Anne Bradstreet and Tsai Wen Gi,

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Alice Notley and me ... (111)

Perhaps Mayer uses Chaucer to lure the reader into her list of female poets, which ends up being ten lines long, and spans various origins, schools, and movements. She includes herself in the lineage of women literary figures who have written "anyway," in spite of the historical lack of "time, chance, education or notion / To write some poetry." Following that list, Mayer turns again toward male-authored texts, at least by allusion:

Touching history with desire

For history to be like food

On the table in the light of the window

It's shared

There are some things we cannot say!

No, I can't say that! (112)

The first line in this passage echoes Eliot's "mixing memory and desire" at the beginning of "The Wasteland"; the repeated mention of history in the first two lines of the passage recalls Ezra Pound's definition of an epic as a "poem including history." But while Pound's history is political, economic, martial, and mythological, for Mayer, history is "like food / On the table"—an indoor affair, domesticized. Mayer's subsequent

exclamations of what one "cannot say" could address the difficulty of translating, or scaling, such epical ambition for her poem about home life. In the poem's first section, Mayer writes, "Freud Pound & Joyce / Are fine-feathered youth's fair-weather friends / I take that back, better not to mention them / Or it's the end" (19). Important as they may be, these masculinist figures spell "the end" for the poem at hand. By "taking back" the "mention" of these male giants of twentieth century art and letters without actually eliding them from the text, Mayer allows for their influence on her own terms. Throughout *Midwinter Day*, one can find such baits and switches, in which Mayer reckons her grand poetic ambition, and identification with "Freud Pound & Joyce," against the domestic orientation of her life, which links her to contemporaneous, woman-centric discourses.

The book's brief third section, in which Mayer takes her children to the public library, contains some of the book's most fascinating moments from the standpoint of Mayer's complex positionality as a female experimental writer. Mayer foregrounds her entry into the library by listing American literary giants who once made their homes nearby, including Edith Wharton, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and W.E.B. DuBois. By placing herself in the library, and within physical proximity of such luminaries of literary history, Mayer makes a bid for the inclusion of her own texts and body in the same space. That she enters with her two young daughters suggests a bid for legitimacy as an author who is also, unlike any of those authors she names, a mother. The term "public library," like "walled garden," is one of those signs that seems, impossibly, both redundant and oxymoronic: at war with itself. The cloistered privacy of *library* clangs strangely against the municipal stamp of its *public* role. Within that contradiction, is, of course, opportunity and possibility. Mayer's authorship, as she asserts and enacts it throughout *Midwinter Day*, under the signs of author-mother, and female-experimental-

writer, carries with it a similar set of contradictions, possibilities, protections, and limitations. In the library, Mayer's daughter Marie has a temper tantrum: "It's a violent outburst of rage and annoyance / Like not having a room of one's own or the love of another" (44). It is difficult to parse Mayer's attitude toward the well-known Virginia Woolf maxim to which Mayer refers here, that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write" (Woolf 4). Mayer's allusion, despite her engagement with feminist authors and texts throughout *Midwinter Day*, feels halfway ironic, because the reference is set down before a screaming child, in a public setting, as if to underscore Mayer's lack of a room of her own. However, any irony or cynicism is only partial, because Mayer, like Anne Bradstreet, Tsai Wen Gi, and Woolf's "Anon.,"[6] writes "anyway," room of her own or not.

In addition to providing cultural and historical context for Mayer's authorship, considering the influence of American feminisms of the 1970s and '80s on *Midwinter Day* provides context to the conditions in which Mayer published. Peter Baker's 1996 reading of Mayer provides example of the setting that made, and may continue to make, authorship a site of anxiety for women. Regarding the third section of *Midwinter Day*, Baker writes,

> For comparisons to the verse-writing skill exemplified in these lines, one might point to Charles Olson's projective measure or Robert Creeley's nuance of line and syllable, the most personal poems of Williams, or the strangely affective line of John Ashbery at his expressive best. One might have to turn to such distinguished French practitioners of the free verse line as Pierre Reverdy to find the balance of image and versification that Mayer achieves here with such apparent ease. And again there is the specifically personal and familial consciousness that makes

[6] "I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman" Woolf writes (49).

> Mayer's work valuable as a compelling example of a woman's writing in late-twentieth-century, real-world America.

Baker draws an implicit but obvious distinction between "men's" and "women's" writing. He names several male authors to which Mayer's "skill" might be compared—Olson, Creeley, Ashbery, Reverdy—while Mayer's *subject*, "specifically personal and familial consciousness," is associated with "woman's writing." Baker writes of a vague, "real-world America" that he tropes as women's jurisdiction. He devotes most of the passage to describing in detail the poetry of Mayer's male cohorts, never naming a female author, nor, for that matter, describing *Mayer*'s poetry. Earlier in the same piece, Baker suggests the possible presence of the anxiety of influence in Mayer's approach toward Stein, but he seems unaware of the possibility or presence of anxiety of authorship in Mayer's work and thought.

The gendered reception of her own work could be one of the reasons Mayer has abstained from writing criticism. That abstention is notable because, among what Susan Rubin Suleiman has called the "double margin" of avant garde or experiment writers who are also women, those who play the dual role of poet-critic or poet-theorist are, if not the norm, certainly more visible. Kathleen Fraser's feminist journal *HOW(ever)*, which ran from 1983 to 1992, for example, published poems beside a "Working Note" from each poet, "to give some idea of the processes that had gone into the production and of any formal problems proposed or encountered" (Vickery 92). *HOW(ever)* helped establish a generation of experimental writers, including Alice Notley, Beverly Dahlen, Myung Mi Kim, Joan Retallack, and Fraser, who engaged with feminist and Language themes as poets and as critics. Despite sharing formal and ideological interests with such writers, Mayer's silence on the critical front makes her an uneasy fit among even such an idiosyncratic bunch.

Maggie Nelson closes her chapter on Mayer in *Women, The New York School, and Other True Abstractions* with a personal anecdote exemplary of Mayer's slippery resistance toward, and as a subject of, criticism. As a young poet in New York City, Nelson had asked Mayer for advice on whether she should apply to an English Literature doctoral program. Mayer wrote in response, "i don't think you should ever write criticism" (129). Nelson, then, considers her critical work on Mayer to be "an act of both disobedience and homage" (129). As a poet, Mayer's refusal to participate in criticism in a field in which criticism can confer poetry with prestige, readership, and canonicity, is particularly notable. That refusal, as Nelson points out, turns into disobedience what other writers would consider homage. Mayer would probably approve of such lingering and unresolvable ambiguities. Mayer's critical silence, alongside her often contradictorily feminist poetics, amount to not a refusal to answer the question "who is speaking?" but a refusal to answer the question in a way that offers readers a coherent self, or a final story.

Hejinian "As a Person on Paper" and a Woman in Life

For Lyn Hejinian, as for other feminist experimentalists like Susan Howe, Maureen N. McLane, and Rachel Blau du Plessis, distinguishing between criticism and poetry often seems beside the point. Hejinian is much less interested in finding static definitions of words like criticism, theory, and poetry than in considering how language might function to create new experiments and experiences within and past the boundaries that terms like criticism and poetry tend to designate. The final essay in Hejinian's nonfiction collection *The Language of Inquiry* (2000), "Happily," is lineated, troubling the boundary between poem and essay—and, perhaps, suggesting the possibility of other

forms for conveying the ideas like those contained in the preceding pieces in the collection.

Throughout her genre-crossing experiments, Hejinian, unlike Mayer, has strongly identified and been identified by critics as a member of the Language school. The essays in *The Language of Inquiry* were written over 25 years, and, together with the contextualizing headnotes that Hejinian provides before each entry, they constitute something of a personal intellectual history of the Language movement. An implicit but important argument in *The Language of Inquiry* is Hejinian's centrality to the history of Language poetry. Hejinian describes conversations and debates between herself and major figures in and related to Language and experimental poetry, and the essays and headnotes relate changes in her own work and thinking to changes in the culture of and surrounding Language poetry.

The Language designation that has adhered to Hejinian throughout her career describes, but also has the potential to conceal, the border crossings with which her poetics engage. Hejinian's close association with the Language movement has made it difficult to read the presences of other, and at times antithetical, modes of thought in Hejinian's work. Hejinian's close fit with the Language movement, and, especially, her own critical writings invite close comparisons with other Language writers, particularly female and feminist poets, like the writers I likened her to in the opening sentence of this section. By reading Hejinian's early book *My Life* in the context of the feminisms of its time and alongside Mayer's *Midwinter Day*, I hope to unsettle, if only slightly, Hejinian's coherence as a feminist Language writer, pointing out some of the ways in which she joins Mayer in the Disputed Territory.

From its first publication in 1980 on Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop's Burning Deck Press, through subsequent editions, including a sequel/revision, *My Life in the*

Nineties (Shark Books, 2003), and a 2013 Wesleyan University Press edition of the two titles in a single volume, critics have interpreted *My Life* as a reader-oriented text that invites one to make one's own meanings from the text's often-fragmented language. Hejinian wrote the first version of *My Life* when she was 37; it consists of thirty-seven sections with thirty-seven sentences each. The second edition she wrote at 45, and, accordingly, added eight sentences to each section, and eight more 45-sentences sections. Later versions have continued along these lines, a living text reminiscent of Walt Whitman's many editions of *Leave of Grass*, as Srikanth Reddy points out. Reddy says of *My Life*, "few examples of literary form have so elegantly connected the life of a writer to the shape of a book" (83). Mayer's *Midwinter Day* might be another example of such an elegant connection, given its day-length conceit of content and composition. Hejinian herself suggests as much in her 1985 essay "The Rejection of Closure." *Midwinter Day* is one of Hejinian's examples of an "open text," which, like Roland Barthes's writerly text, "invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies" (43).[7] In "The Rejection of Closure," Hejinian also cites *My Life* as an example of an open text; the essay itself is an example of Hejinian's facility at providing critical terms through which to describe and understand Language poetry and experimental poetics in general. Numerous scholars, including Marjorie Perloff and Lynn Keller, have employed and drawn from Hejinian's notion of the open text. Like Hejinian's designation as a Language poet, the designation of *My Life* as an open text signals experimentalism, but it is such a

[7] *Midwinter Day*, like *My Life*, is an open text, Hejinian writes, because its formal constraint (that it be written in a single day) functions to achieve a sense that its borders are arbitrary and, thus, penetrable. According to Hejinian, in *Midwinter Day*,

> The implication (correct) is that the words and the ideas (thoughts, perceptions, etc. —the materials) continue beyond the work. One has simply stopped because one has run out of units or minutes, and not because a conclusion has been reached nor 'everything' said. ("Rejection of Closure" 46)

neat fit that it could foreclose approaches to the text that, though likely less elegant, speak in other ways to the text's methods and experimentation. My reading of *My Life* considers the social and feminist contexts in which it was composed, suggesting the ways in which Hejinian's text productively disappoints the expectations that tend to surround it.

The social atmosphere in the vibrant early days of Language poetry, in the late 1970s through the early 1980s, were stultifying and silencing for women poets—a period that corresponds directly with the composition and publication of the first version of *My Life* (and, of course, of *Midwinter Day*). During these years, as Ann Vickery shows in her feminist genealogy of Language poetry, *Leaving Lines of Gender*, female experimental poets like Hejinian occupied socially uncomfortable positions, writing and publishing among groups of mostly male poets that prized community and encouraged social involvement but also valued masculinist modes of public speaking and conversation. For example, Vickery describes numerous talks and readings at which male poets held the floor for hours while women sat silently. In a headnote to "The Rejection of Closure" written for the essay's republication in *The Language of Inquiry*, Hejinian recalls that atmosphere.

> Within the writing community, discussions of gender were frequent, and they were addressed both to perceptible practical problems (instances of injustice) immediately affecting people's work and lives and to longer-term questions of power and, in particular, the ethics of meaning. (40)

Hejinian's recollection contrasts interestingly with Vickery's genealogy. Although Hejinian is recalling discussions of gender, she does not apply a gendered lens of inquiry to her recollections. In her headnote, from 2000, the community of 20 years prior discusses as one, while in Vickery's genealogy (also published in 2000), women remain

silent, at least in public. When contrasted with Vickery's, Hejinian's account seems almost evasive, or at the very least lacking in detail. Hejinian's lack of specificity could also suggest some sense of the frustration inherent in translating "perceptible" gender imparity into a durable feminist "ethics of meaning."

Vickery's archival research recovers evidence of Hejinian and other feminist poets deeply considering issues of gender, self, and community, most fascinatingly in their frequent personal correspondences among one another. These various disagreements that arose based on necessarily dynamic and numerous definitions of feminism evince the challenges that experimental women's writing, and women writers, faced in the 1970s and 1980s. For example, in a letter to Howe, Hejinian writes of feeing conflicted "between wanting to 'speak my mind' about issues vs. a hesitancy to inflict my attitude on others" (qtd. in Vickery 121). Howe's response to Hejinian criticizes male Language poets, to which Hejinian responds, somewhat surprisingly, that female poets' silence was "as much our fault as the men's," pointing out that male poets had invited female poets to give talks in front of the community and the women had refused (qtd. in Vickery 122). At its core, Hejinian writes, the issue "was not that the men are ignoring us here—but that the women are extremely hesitant to expose their opinions; and that is a problem with roots in the past far more than it is rooted in present conditions" (qtd. in Vickery 122). These letters, which were written in 1980, the year the first version of *My Life* was published, suggest Hejinian's unwillingness to direct male attention toward the problem of gender discrimination. Hejinian employs an us vs. them discourse (e.g., "us," "our," "the women," as opposed to "the men"), positing a binary between men and women that runs counter to the antiessentialism that critics, including Spahr and Hinton, ultimately tend to find in *My Life*. I argue that considering the social context of gendered silence and discrimination in which the text was composed—and Hejinian's ambivalence regarding

how to respond to that context— can support, rather than conflict with, a reading of *My Life* as a text that exists between and/or outside various ideological and generic borders.

Spahr's important reading of *My Life* draws on the text to call for more inclusive and reader-oriented critical histories of American autobiography; and is also exemplary of contemporary critical readings of *My Life* that, I argue, can be somewhat complicated by considering the text in the cultural context in which it was produced. According to Spahr,

> *My Life* continually questions the possibility of essential self-reflection, of autobiography as the place where one might perpetuate a flattering version of the self. This is a work that looks more at the nature of the autobiographical than at Hejinian's "actual" life; with [Judith] Butler, it problematizes the "actual" itself. In *My Life* gender is not stable and not an absolute. "As such," Hejinian writes, "a person on paper, I am androgynous." (144)

Hejinian prefaces her statement of androgyny with a clause distinguishing and defining the field of language as separate from lived experience: Hejinian's "I" is "a person on paper," not a person in the flesh. In the flesh, as opposed to "on paper," Hejinian suggests, the author could not achieve such androgyny. However, I argue that Hejinian's attitude might be more pessimistic, and more gendered, than Spahr suggests. Spahr aligns Hejinian's text, ideologically, with Butler's argument that gender is performative, but Butler's *Gender Trouble* was not published until 1990, a full decade after *My Life* first appeared. Of course, Hejinian's text could still employ Butlerian antiessentialism even while pre-dating Butler. However, much suggests that this is not the case, including the hesitation and binarism with which Hejinian responds to Howe's charges of sexism in among Language writers and the text of *My Life* itself.

Spahr points out that Hejinian employs "the neuter pronoun" throughout *My Life*, but the examples that she provides suggest Hejinian's very occupation with, and attention to, an essentialist view of gender associated with French feminism[8]—albeit conveyed through ruptured poetical practices (Spahr 145). For example, Spahr highlights the passage, "In the sentence, 'one climbs five worn wood stairs and turns left to the scarred open door, then crosses a hall and two feet of linoleum to the four foot Formica counter with two sacks of groceries in seven steps, I am the one." (Hejinian, *My Life* 80-81). Spahr reads this passage as an example of Hejinian's "despecification of the pronoun" (146). Hejinian does not explicitly gender the "I"/"one," and, as Spahr shows, distances the reader from the scene by beginning the sentence with the metaliterary phrase, "In the sentence." However, the scene into which the I "crosses" is, itself, gendered. In the context of the scene, the word "sentence" comes to take on another meaning: It suggests a weary, middle-class housewife returning from the grocery store, serving out the sentence to which cultural expectations have consigned her. Shot through with significant-sounding numbers, the passage sounds like a word problem from a child's math assignment. The "sentence" begins and ends with the number one, as if to say that all those other numbers, along with the sentence's and the subject's progress across them, did not mean a thing. The "sentence" that Hejinian quotes (beginning with the words "one climbs") and the sentence Hejinian that writes, as author of *My Life* (beginning with the words, "In the sentence"), end as she states, "I am the one." As a doubly final statement, the number one becomes, simultaneously, climax and reduction. Reading the speaker's and author's movement through the/her "sentence"/sentence as an effort to

[8] Hejinian associates the open text with the *ecriture feminine* of Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous, finding examples in both theorists' work of associations between the "feminine textual body" and the open text (Cixous, qtd. in "Rejection of Closure" 55).

intensify, deconstruct, or destabilize identity allows the final clause to suggests the failure of that project up against the material reality of household tasks.

If Hejinian's interest lies less in destabilizing gender identity than in conveying its presence in daily, material life, her engagement in *My Life* with the notion of anxiety of authorship is, like Mayer's attention to the same thematic in *Midwinter Day*, indicative of her attention to contemporaneous feminism. Hejinian creates a string of references to the anxiety of authorship that materializes and enforces the male-female binary while questioning its implicit sense of hierarchy, an ambivalent expression exemplary of her complex relationship to the feminist and social contexts in which she wrote *My Life*. One of the repeated sentences in *My Life* is, "I wrote my name in every one of his books." The phrase first appears as a chapter heading (28), and is repeated throughout, enacting the inscription of female identity ("my name") onto the patriarchal world of letters ("his books"). In its subsequent appearances, the phrase is altered, forming something of a plot. The sentence, "When I learned to read, I had written my name in every one of his books," appears midway through *My Life* (60). And finally, "(this was the same summer that I read my father's copy of *Anna Karenina* and thus made it my own, so that later that fall it was logical that I should write my name in every other one of his books)" (96). These latter two variations on the theme "I wrote my name in every one of his books" are difficult to parse: when did the speaker write her name in his books? Did it really happen? In what way was it "logical" to do so? If the latter two passages are read together, the temporal sequence of events seems to be:

1) The speaker read *Anna Karenina.*
2) The speaker wrote her name in every (other) one of his books.
3) The speaker learned to read.

The confusion of tenses across these appearances, and the difficulty of piecing them together into a coherent narrative, suggests a ruptured, secret history of female authorship. That it is her father's copy of *Anna Karenina* that the speaker reads further associates the fractured narrative with the idea of the anxiety of authorship, given its relationship to Bloom's anxiety of influence and established male literary life. By repeating the phrase "I wrote my name in every one of his books" throughout the text, Hejinian creates an insistence on authorship—a community of self or selves, within the isolation of the female writerly "I." That insistence becomes all the more understandable given Hejinian's social context as Vickery describes it.

The scattered appearance of anxiety over authorship throughout *My Life* is one of many disrupted "plots" in the book through which Hejinian simultaneously answers and evades the question "who is speaking?" Another involves the insistently ringing telephone, which the speaker seems more irritated by each time it appears. Considered alongside the household discourse in *My Life*, the sense emerges of a frustrated housewife who has little time to get her "work done." "I'll just keep myself from picking up the telephone, in order to get some work done," Hejinian writes (44). In a later section, "Tell anyone who telephones that I'm not home" (68). And, at last, as frustration mounts, "Whatever I am doing, the rude telephone interrupts, saying, 'Stop doing that!" (85). Hejinian's domestic is conveyed more experimentally than Mayer's, through fragmentation, repetition, and parataxis, but when she repeats throughout, "I laugh as if my pots were clean," it feels like the same "Shit" through which Mayer stumbles as she wonders, "Are these dishes clean or dirty."

To extend the imagery of the household, for both Mayer and Hejinian, feminism and experimentalism might be less like their official residencies than like rooms in which they tend to spend a lot of time. As a collective critical history of experimental women's

poetry takes shape, Vickery, Simpson, Frost, and others have discussed the potentially irresolvable problematic of the feminist critic, who by participating in critical discourse, risks reinscribing the hierarchical and binaristic modes of thought that, as a contemporary feminist, she seeks to dismantle. However, alongside such dismantling is the feminist work of construction. Here, that construction entails the development of narratives of women's experimental writing that speak openly about the realities of women's daily and writing lives, past and present. Without space for "mistakes," nonfeminist gestures, and even antifeminist ideologies in constructed histories of feminist experimental poetry, there is little possibility for the complex feminist criticism that works like *Midwinter Day* and *My Life*, with their rigorous attention to women's lives, demand.

CHAPTER 6:

QUESTIONS OF TRAVEL

Waiting Round

...*das Dasein ist run*, being is round.

—Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (234)

What is Geography?

A description of the earth's surface.

What is the Earth?

The planet or body on which we live.

What is the shape of the Earth?

Round, like a ball.

—from the epigraph to Elizabeth Bishop's *Geography III*, and attributed to "First Lessons in Geography," Monteith's Geographical Series, A.S. Barnes & Co., 1884 (*CP* 157)

You wouldn't believe how often critics have applied the word "vertiginous" to Elizabeth Bishop's iconic, much-anthologized "In the Waiting Room," the first poem in her last book, *Geography III*. They are typically referring to the moment around which the poem turns, when the fragile epistemological path built by the girl "Elizabeth" threatens to crumble. After reading a magazine, then hearing a sudden, pained cry from her aunt off in the dentist's chair, Elizabeth meets with:

the sensation of falling off

the round, turning world

into cold, blue-black space. (*CP* 160)

Vertiginous: of the vertical, the up-and-down—but also of the circular, the "turning world," round and round and round...

When it comes to *vertiginous* sensations, I am dangerously prone to the power of suggestion, as vulnerable as the girl in my brother's grade who we weren't allowed to touch because, the school nurse told us, she only had four layers of skin rather than five. I was dizzy for weeks after I read the *New Yorker* article about Laura Hillenbrand and her life-altering, nearly life-*ending*, dizziness (unfortunately, it can be read for free online). I've cried because I was so dizzy, gone to the doctor with dizziness. I've had dizziness migraines. I have to stop writing this paragraph now or I'll be down with dizziness for the day. It might already be too late.

As suggestible as I am, however, Bishop's poem does not make me dizzy. Is it supposed to? What *about* the poem is vertiginous?

Lee Zimmerman opens his object-relational psychoanalytic discussion of Bishop with a reading of what he calls "the heart" of the poem—and, I think, the heart of the poem's "vertiginous" designation (160). Zimmerman identifies the poem's heart in the same lines I quoted above:

the sensation of falling off

the round, turning world

into cold, blue-black space.

He also helpfully points out that that Bishop's "sensation" in these lines "has been characterized by many readers, following Helen Vendler, as 'vertigo'" (160). So now we know where the whole "vertiginous" thing started—with "Domestication, Domesticity, and the Otherworldly," Vendler's characteristically ratiocinative appreciation of the poet,

published in a 1977 special issue of *World Literature Today*: "Homage to Elizabeth Bishop, Our 1976 Laureate."

"The child is attacked by vertigo," Vendler writes. "In the Waiting Room," according to Vendler, dramatizes "the child" perceiving a divide between "savage" and "domesticated" that she does not have the equipment to understand. "The child cannot bear the conjunction and faints. Language fails the six-year-old." (25). Vendler concludes that Bishop's poetics give "a joy more strange than the familiar blessings of the world made human" (28).

It's been so long since Vendler wrote that piece on Bishop. And longer, of course, since the poem was first published—in the *New Yorker*, July 17, 1971. Soon it will be the centennial of the "February, 1918" in which "In the Waiting Room" takes place. I'm writing, as Bakhtin might put it, from a different chronotope. Thomas Travisano shows that recent readings of Bishop, with her tonal nuance and ambiguity, have benefited from the increased critical and cultural attention to nonmainstream discourses of late. But still, I can't find a discussion of "In the Waiting Room," from before or since the post-1990 surge in her popularity (which Travisano identified, and dubbed "The Elizabeth Bishop Phenomenon") that says this one specific thing about the poem that I don't know how to say.

The ways that we American white people talk about race are round. I mean that they come back to the beginning. "Round and round," Bishop writes of what Elizabeth sees in *National Geographic*.

> A dead man slung on a pole
> —"Long Pig," the caption said.
> Babies with pointed heads
> wound round and round with string;

black, naked women with necks

wound round and round with wire

like the necks of light bulbs.

Their breasts were horrifying. (*CP* 159)

Vendler doesn't ignore at all what Bishop tropes as "strange" and "savage." In fact, she goes right to it. Vendler quotes every line in the poem with the word "black" in it, *and* the line about those "horrifying" breasts, *and* the line, toward the end of the poem, where "the child" remembers them as "awful hanging breasts."

And yet, she—Vendler, I mean, or maybe I mean Bishop, or maybe I mean me—doesn't *touch it.*

There is a way of talking about race without talking about race. No, not *race*. That isn't even the right word.

Language fails me.

I don't have the word for it.

The word I'm looking for is not *vertiginous*, although that is the one I keep finding.

*

I've sat in the waiting room. I don't want to talk about it.

*

Later in *his* essay, Zimmerman, too, turns to that familiar word, vertiginous, to describe "In the Waiting Room." After excerpting the blizzard of questions from the

"First Lessons in Geography" textbook with which Bishop opens *Geography III*, Zimmerman writes, "This vertiginous list ends the epigraph, as 'First Lessons' leaves a student wondering: where am I? 'In the Waiting Room' expands this question: if I don't know *where* I am, how do I know *who* I am?" (511).

For Travisano, "In the Waiting Room" is "a poem exploring a vertiginous turning point in [Bishop's] own early development" (*Midcentury Quartet* 74). In her reception history of *National Geographic*, Stephanie Hawkins calls the poem a scene of "dramatic encounter with cultural difference that provokes a vertiginous loss of self" (20).

Marilyn May Lombardi examines the vertiginous-ness of the poem from a feminist perspective:

> When the aunt's cry of pain makes what Helene Cixous might call a "vertiginous crossing" into the body of her young niece, Elizabeth derives no pleasure from the "identificatory embrace" that results. The effect is indeed "vertiginous" but only in the worst possible sense; the ground gives way beneath the young girl as her old sense of herself collapses. (159)

For French feminist Cixous, the "vertiginous crossing" between women's voices and selves is a celebratory, joyful thing. For Bishop/Elizabeth, it is a scene of psychic pain. Lombardi argues that poem's discomfort with identities mixing, "crossing," melding together, is suggestive of Bishop's lifelong discomfort with intimacy of any kind—not only with specific people, but with feminism and its often-implied community of women. Bishop seems to have approved of and maybe even identified with feminism ("I've always considered myself a strong feminist," she says in her *Paris Review* interview, perhaps somewhat trollingly) and yet, she held it at arm's length (refusing inclusion in anthologies of women's poetry, for example).

*

I would like to advance a theory of my own: that the *literary experience* of the vertiginous (as opposed to *vertigo*, which I know is an actual medical condition because I once had a coworker who had it) necessitates the combination of the *Round* and the *Up and Down*. To get so high, or feel so high, that you might fall, while, simultaneously, feeling "round, turning": *that* would be vertiginous. It seems beyond dispute that Elizabeth of "In the Waiting Room" experiences that combinatory sensation, particularly since so many critics have applied the word to the poem—and applied it to those three lines of the poem that depict the impossible vertical *fall* off the *round* world.

But "In the Waiting Room" is so organized, so resolutely *undizzy*. The poem is a straight line, shaped like a ruler. And as ruler, it marks and measures the distance away from the "horrifying" roundness that occasions it, its knowledge: "you are one of *them*" (Bishop *CP* 160).

*

I don't know what it takes to stop being dizzy.

When I am dizzy for hours or days on end, I drink a lot of Pedialyte and take off my glasses. Eventually it goes away. Thoughts of dizziness cause dizziness, so I try not to think about what it is I am.

I really don't know what it takes, but what if, to stop being dizzy, you had to choose between the two components of *vertiginous*: up-and-down, or roundness?

Maybe the poem's—the poet's—up-and-down aesthetic is its anodyne.

*

In the waiting room, Elizabeth "carefully / studied the photographs" in an old issue of *National Geographic* (*CP* 159). I've already told you what she finds there.

Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;
black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying. (*CP* 159)

The horror here is in the mashing together of the First and Third worlds ("Why should I be my aunt, / or me, or anyone?" (Bishop *CP* 161). Everything is mashed together. I always think I'm accidentally reading the same lines over again when I hit that repetition of the phrase "wound round and round." But no, things repeat, rather than progress linearly, in the land of wire and string. And in this place…the light bulb of Elizabeth's looking. Where there should be no light at all.

*

Why do "black people ignite critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis in literature not written by them"? Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* asks (viii).

Tracing the "Africanist" presence in American fiction, Morrison shows how canonical white authors sit on top of their black characters, shut them up, dehumanize and two-dimensionalize them, so that, in relation, white protagonists appear all the fuller, realer, more human.

Morrison's discussion of Willa Cather's last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), is relevant here: Cather, Morrison says, "struggle[s] to address an almost completely buried subject: the interdependent working of power, race, and sexuality in a white woman's battle for coherence" (20). "In the Waiting Room," too, is about "power, race, and sexuality in a white woman's battle for coherence," and yet it, too, "almost completely buries" that subject.

An anti-epistemology, it doesn't know, or want to know, what it knows.

I scarcely dared to look

to see what it was I was. (Bishop *CP* 160)

"'What it was I was,' is, by the way, perhaps the most accurate, most mordantly beautiful epitaph imaginable," Dan Chiasson writes (21). How gently Chiasson points out the *other* meaning of that line, as if I had already thought of it! Although, as many times as I have read this poem,

trying to unfold it, unfold it,

I never saw that shadow of an erased comma: "what it was, I was."

It: blue-black, round and round with Being.

*

In childhood, you are constantly being pushed out of the safe world you have (often *literally*) crawled through sand and mud to make, into the "horrifying," disorganized, nonsensical *other* space.

"I don't want to go outside!" said a boy I was babysitting. "It's too small!"

"What does that chord sound like that to you?" my boyfriend, a guitar teacher, asked his little student. Without pause, the boy replied: "Trashy!"

*

Kirstin Hotelling Zola writes about Bishop's persistent engagement with race and gender. "What is so provocative about these pieces…is Bishop's willingness to interrogate her own discomfort in the face of otherness," Zola says of earlier, less dog-eared poems, like "Cootchie," "Faustina," and "Rose Rocks," but the same could be said for "In the Waiting Room" (56). Bishop unflinchingly makes the flinching reader look at her, flinchingly, looking.

Through archival research, Zola shows that Bishop went over and over that line about the breasts of the black women in the photograph, writing, rewriting, erasing, and rewriting it. "Like the young 'Elizabeth,' she cannot stop looking at, or rewriting them" (59).

Despite all that rewriting, Bishop never describes those breasts. What do they *look* like? From this master of precision, only the word "horrifying." If that is it, the very *site* of all that mishmash of gender/sex/race/class/global/psychic pain, why, at that moment, is there no *sight*?

Their breasts were horrifying.

I read it right straight through. (*CP* 160)

Read/right/straight: words that order the made world, tonic to the black horror in the previous line.

This is a round poem, despite its best formal intentions—newspaper column shape, short lines. For me it is a donut, with a hole at its center: *What do those breasts look like?*

*

Bishop's Bravery. The worst things in the world are bespoke, like bad dreams or pain in the exact part of your body you hate most to think of. And Bishop goes right to it, her central specific terror (which sounds like the name of a railroad line). She is brave, and the ugly beauty of "In the Waiting Room" is in that bravery.

*

The first story in John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, "Frame-Tale," instructs the reader to assemble out of the page a Mobius strip ("Cut on dotted line. Twist end once and fasten AB to ab, CD to cd") that repeats forever, "ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN," so that the end of the phrase becomes its beginning (1-2). I would like to make a Mobius strip of Bishop's "In the Waiting Room," somehow. I want to cut, twist, and fasten it, roll it round: reveal its roundness.

*

It was Bishop who famously wrote "(*Write it!*)," and who, with her decades-long revisions, insisted on, by *writing it*, getting it *right* (*CP* 178).

Against that deliberate, *this*-word-and-no-other sense that I get from "In the Waiting Room" (as I do from most of Bishop's poems), there is also a strange sense of ...

more than randomness—

more than the existentially inflected randomness of its proper nouns, Aunt Consuelo, February, *National Geographic*, Osa and Martin Johnson—

...there is something in the poem that feels like *carelessness*:

By carelessness,

I do not mean the opposite of *care*.

(I am lost in this poem.)

*

The poem ends with a dateline:

... Outside,

in Worcester, Massachusetts,

were night and slush and cold,

and it was still the fifth

of February, 1918. (*CP* 161)

clasping speaker, poet, and reader back to the facts of the visible world. That signoff feels like when a somewhat stiff person tells you something intense and confessional, and then, when they get up to go, they say goodbye coldly, as if punishing you for the intimacy the two of you have just shared. Saying, *it stops here*.

Bishop plays in the dark, and asks us not to mention it. Of course she does. If you're going to come back from that childhood place, you have to not mention it. That's the deal.

We, like Bishop's Elizabeth, stand on the same ground as *them*, "those awful hanging breasts," connected, and it doesn't make us dizzy. Why would it? We play in the dark all the time.

When Elizabeth/Bishop (who is speaking, when?) returns to the breasts near the end of the poem, the breasts stand in entirely for the "black, naked women"; the poem returns to those women as breasts only: *those awful hanging breasts*. Elizabeth is well on her way already to doing the work that Vendler talks about: dividing "human" from non-.

*

Derrida talks about archi-writing, the writing before speaking or even thinking. When my alarm goes off in the morning and it seems I have just written the best thing, before I even began, I feel I know what he means. By the time I open my eyes, I don't understand anymore.

I think of Elizabeth's *National Geographic* experience as archi-*reading*. The reading you do before you have the tools to order. The reading that fucks you up, imposes hierarchies, or helps you to impose the hierarchies you already have divined elsewhere. Of *course* it's racist. There wouldn't be racism if it wasn't.

*

"Literature is the archive of a culture," writes the feminist scholar Toril Moi (268). Or, as my friend Jenny read on Facebook the other day, "Drunk people, leggings, and children never lie."

Our literature is our tell. It doesn't care whether we address it or ignore it or pick and choose among its messages. It archives us, like a child.

On Reading Jeffrey Renard Allen's "Days..."

Rage is not a custom

—Jeffery Renard Allen, "Tricks into Light"

One of the *customs* that the poet and novelist Jeffrey Renard Allen observes is the dedication of a poem to an eminent person. In pieces from Allen's two volumes of poetry, *Stellar Places* and *Harbors and Spirits*, his dedicatees are most often from the world of arts and entertainment, like Lauryn Hill, David Cronenberg, and Mahalia Jackson. Rather than about, or to, or of, his subjects, Allen pledges his poems *for* them, his visions of their visions laid at their feet.

—for James Byrd, Jr[1]

But Byrd's fame is of a different kind, and merits a different kind of dedication. The *for* that prefaces "Days" indicates something closer to elegy and memory than tribute and vision.

His name comes bounding back from the decades, *oh yeah, of course*, connected inseparably to the term "hate crime." Three white supremacists chained Byrd by the ankles and dragged him from a truck for three miles, in Jasper, Texas, 1998. They dumped his remains in a Black graveyard and drove to a BBQ. The Matthew Shepard

[1] This and all other standalone, italicized passages are from Allen's poem "Days," unless otherwise noted.

Act, the anti-hate crime legislation that President Obama signed in 2009, is officially titled the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act.

Ezra Pound defined *epic* as a "poem including history." Is there a word for a poem including rage?

lynched June 7, 1998, Jasper Texas

Derrida argues that the date inscribed in all writing is what makes philosophy impossible. Philosophy attempts writing without a dateline, an untimed *always* that never could be. Weddings and circumcisions are among his exemplary dates, because they are truly one-time-only, and yet they repeat, in a sense, via anniversary. What about a lynching—its unrepeatable/repetition in America, always coming back around from history? "It looks like the '60s all over again," people said of the pics on Twitter of protesters vs. police in Ferguson.

Transitively: I date a poem. Intransitively: a poem dates if it ages, if it has a history and is of a certain age.

—Jacques Derrida, "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan"

One of the things that makes "Days" *undated* is that the date of June 7, 1998 is what Derrida might call an "anniversary" of the date August 9, 2014, and the date August 25, 1955; the death of Michael Brown, the death of Emmett Till. A date, specific mark, that conveys the eerie truth that what *cannot* return *will* return, that it perhaps already has. Derrida would distinguish between the "internal" and "external" dating of "Days." The explicit, external date on the poem is not necessarily the date of the poem's *writing*. Inside the poem is a secret date only it knows, its private date.

Memory in / side the humming shell

It plays at the edge of my memory, the huge public discussion of nearly 20 years ago about how long Byrd stayed alive as he was being dragged behind that truck. I can almost not remember it; it is almost too bad and distant to recall. Was he alive the whole time? If so, was he conscious? They said he tried to lift his head. How much did he suffer? It comes rushing back. How much did he suffer? Can they show it as a wedge on a pie chart, as a level of liquid in a jar?

Boll weevil in the cotton

Worm in the corn

Devil in the white man

War going on

Gwendolyn Brooks, Allen's literary relative from Chicago's South Side, began her response to a similarly horrific event, the murder of Till, by writing: *From the first it had been like a / Ballad. It had the beat inevitable. It had the blood.*

As ballad-like as "Days" begins, with its regular meter and rhyme, even its war-going-on blood, Allen's poem is a prism. A single angle is insufficient. Over the course of its one-and-a-half pages, fourteen laconic stanzas, it plays many roles. List poem. Religious poem—psalm, prayer. Ballad. Pastoral. Warning. A lyric guided by sound. Work song. Dialogue. Dramatic monologue. "Days" tries on each of those forms and more, every stanza another try, a trick, a chance.

O, this howling distance

Pilot,

don't you pilot me

Who is at the wheel? No Pilot, no pilot, no author, no God. No one to watch or listen, no one to witness. *O, this howling distance* unbolts the stanza with its howl of lyric intensity; after the empty *Pilot*, that opening lyric crumbles like an old brick. There is as much punctuation in this tercet as there is in the rest of the stanzas combined. The commas after "O" and "Pilot" lengthen the "howling distance" between the surety of "Pilot" and the skepticism in the little-p pilot. And that second comma is suggestive of dialogue, but it doesn't offer any clarity on who might be speaking which words.

Take up that nail and scratch

your torn name

Along the road where Byrd was lynched-by-dragging, police found a wrench with "Berry" written on it: Shawn Allen Berry was the name of the driver of the truck. They found a lighter with "Possum" written on it, "Possum" being the prison nickname of John William King, well-known around Jasper for his white supremacist views. He had a tattoo of a lynching. The police found pieces of Byrd's body in 81 places along the road.

Only got enough of the story to

line me this song

Story/line/song. There are so many ways to tell it, but more is left out than ever gets conveyed. The America we stand on is full of holes like the space between stanzas.

Once again to Derrida, who asks what it means to encounter one specific poem on this specific now:

Today, on this day, at this date.

People are still protesting in Ferguson, and the police are still throwing protestors into into jails, it's just not in the news anymore. I saw tweets that someone shared on Tumblr, saying an official said Darren Wilson, the police officer who shot and killed Mike Brown, will not be indicted. The tweets said police are preparing for full-scale riots after they announce that he won't face charges. Someone from Ferguson posted a pic of a can of gasoline on Facebook, proclaiming she would burn down the town.

What must be commemorated, at once *gathered together and repeated, is,* at the same time*, the date's annihilation, a kind of nothing, or ash.*

—October 2014

Happy Birthday: Notes on Unlikeliness

"Terrible to dress in the clothes / of a period that must end," writes the poet Frank Bidart. I recite these two lines to myself as I get dressed in the morning. Scratch that, I don't recite them—they're deeper inside me than that. The couplet has been with me so long, I can say it without its words. And when I do, I feel my tight grip on this era, although who knows what words will be thrown at it later? My poor, stupid youngish body ("*still* young...," goes a line somewhere else in that poem), draped in its tank tops, in this one particular pair of shorts I've been wearing nearly every warm day for years, waiting to change.

Earlier today, I thought to quote those lines of Bidart's in an essay I am writing about Joan Didion's fashionableness. That's when I realized that, in the decade or more since it became a part of my mental landscape, the details of the couplet's source—a long poem? short, epigrammatic? Funny, sad?—had faded entirely.

When I found it, I shuddered. It was in my treasured, but apparently rarely opened, hardcover edition of Bidart's *In the Western Night: Collected Poems 1965-90*. The second poem in his second book, "Happy Birthday" begins with the line, "Thirty-three, goodbye—"...

Today is *my* thirty-fourth birthday.

(And if I had remembered the rest of that other line, "He's *still* young—;" I would have been able to tell that it was from a different poem, "Self-Portrait, 1969": "He's *still* young—; thirty, but looks younger— / or does he?" it goes.

Not that *knowing* will stop me from repeating to myself, over and over, the mistakes I invented.)

Two days ago, I read Didion's *Blue Nights*, some info-gathering for that essay I've been working on. "Ill health, which is another way of describing what it can cost to maintain momentum, overtakes us when we can imagine no reason to expect it," Didion writes with her trademark shaky-certainty. "I can tell you to the hour when it overtook me—a Thursday morning, August 2, 2007—when I woke with what seemed to be an earache and a reddened area on my face that I mistook for a staph infection." That paragraph overtook *me* on August 2, 2015.

The first time I remember being struck by this…what? concordance? coincidence? nothing at all? was nearly a decade ago, as I lay on my futon in Virginia reading Richard Ford's slim book of short stories *Rock Springs*. "It was September the eighteenth." For awkward Sims in Ford's story "Empire," restlessly wandering the cars of an Amtrak train to Minot, North Dakota, as his wife saws wood in the sleeping car, and for me. I looked up from the book. I always used to lie with my legs up, my ankles hooked over the back of the futon. That time and place feels muffled, as if at the bottom of a pile of dirty clothes. You could see flashes of yourself in a mirror that hung on a door in the next room. "Guess what?" I said to my then-boyfriend.

He was unimpressed. "It's not that strange. There's a one in 365 chance you would read it on this day."

"No there *isn't*." I knew—I *know*—there wasn't.

And if he was correct, or if this parallel, this correlation, can be expressed in numbers at all, with their poker faces, always staring straight ahead, well, then that gets to the heart of what frustrates me so about math, at least as I understand it. What about the other, innumerable books I could have chosen to read on that day instead? What about all the other people who *also* could have checked out *Rock Springs* from the Falls Church

Public Library and *also* could have read it on September 18, but who were not me? Those readers who might not have noticed.

When I looked out from my train window and saw Sims, I shuddered. The probability of it being September 18 for both Sims and me, on our separate trains, seems chanceless, a one in a no-number explosion of black-hole improbability, hurling out from empty outer space. In the "online learning platform" that my school uses, there's an "assessment choice" that I can make when I grade students called "separate and distinct ways of knowing." That's me and Sims: Separate and distinct ways of knowing September 18, contained in our realities, different shelves in a bookcase.

When I was in fifth grade, I had what was to me a very meaningful conversation with my friend's mom one afternoon after school. Overhearing me and her daughter chatting at the kitchen counter, the mom turned to me and said, "You're the kind of person who notices what nobody else does, aren't you? You hear the things people say that everyone else ignores."

"Yes!" I cried passionately. I had never thought of myself as that, or any, type of person, but I wanted to be the person she thought she saw. I wanted to stop interrupting my mom when she talked about her friends, although it was gruesomely boring, to listen, really *listen*, rather than simply *hear*. I started spending recess inside discussing Gary Paulsen books with Mr. Wilson, instead of going out with everyone else and watching Kathleen Hahn do tricks on the highest part of the jungle gym. Maybe my friend's mom was right about me, or maybe I was open to the power of suggestion, but I thought of myself as a *noticer* after that. I never went back to the way I was before.

Elizabeth Bishop's iconic poem "In the Waiting Room" takes place on "5 February, 1918," the day before Bishop's sixth birthday. In the poem, written decades later, Bishop recalls looking at the adults in the room, thinking,

How—I didn't know any

word for it—how "unlikely"...

How *unlikely* that a *date* or day, a shared and coherent number, would be affixed to the variety of unreadable ontological situations that she, as a child, observed. Bishop and the poem's little-girl "Elizabeth," me and Sims, Bidart's thirty-fourth birthday and mine: They gesture at each other across the imaginary dividing lines of "fiction" and "nonfiction," "real" and "invented," alive and dead, the past and a present that is already over as I write this. "Happy Birthday": I would replace the always-being-sung song with Bidart's poem if I could, so that we'd all know these words by heart:

Thirty-three, goodbye—

the awe I feel

is not that you won't come again, or why—

or even that after

a time, we think of those who are dead

with a sweetness that cannot be explained—

but that I've read the trading-cards:

RALPH TEMPLE CYCLIST CHAMPION TRICK RIDER...

*

Thirty-four years old is an adult, by anyone's standard. If I live as long as my father did, then my life is much more than half over.

"When did you feel like an actual *grown-up*?" I asked my dad once.

"Good question," he said. I always regretted asking him a question *as* I asked it. He acted like a movie star being interviewed by an adoring reporter. He would give elliptical answers that all but demanded follow-up questions, to which he responded with half-hour speeches full of literary analysis and archaic cases he had studied in law school. Nevermind! I don't care! I wanted to shout before the whole thing got started.

"The first time we went to Disneyworld as a family," he said.

"How old were you?"

"Thirty-seven."

I just let his answer hang there, with its specificity and obvious depth of personal meaning. I didn't want to hear the monologue he was obviously itching to deliver.

Now that he is dead, my mom, when I remember to ask her, decodes for me those cryptic statements of his that I never activated. She says that here he was defining adulthood financially. Since he had grown up poor, it had probably made him feel like he could handle the financial responsibilities that accompany adulthood to be able to take all of us to Disneyworld. I had been picturing something more interesting.

Near Thunder Mountain, my dad and I passed a man like I had never seen before. He was enormous, Paul Bunyan-like, with a brown beard down to his knees and brown hair, wild, pointing in all directions. His tank top was like an action hero's t-shirt at the end of the movie, ripped everywhere, smudged and dirty, only the mildest suggestion of the color it had been at the beginning of the day. But the most salient detail of his appearance was the turkey leg he was gnawing on. I have never seen such a large, juicy, perfectly formed turkey leg in all my life. It was cartoon-like, unreal.

"Look at that guy!" I said.

My dad laughed. "He's probably a plant." I thought he meant as in "potted."

This kind of thing happened to me all the time when I was little, misunderstandings that I didn't know were misunderstandings, so I altered my world to suit them. My mom told me to poop in the far-off basement bathroom, because she and my dad were having another couple for dinner that night. She meant during dinner, but I didn't know that, so I pooped in the hot, ancient bathroom in the basement for the next twenty-five years. The misunderstanding only got cleared up when I was home for a visit last Thanksgiving and my mom asked me what I was doing down there.

In my confusion, I thought that my dad and this half-human, half-vegetal being might have swapped perspectives, just for an instant, the wiggly world doubling back on itself, untrustworthy, like in the Hayley Mills version of *Freaky Friday*. I thought that looking at himself through this savage turkey-eater's eyes, my dad could see that he really had it all together.

My mom's gloss on what my dad told me is doubly disappointing. First, because it has forced me to revisit that plant/man and strip him of his magic, knowing what I know now about the multiple meanings of the word plant. *And* it reminds me of how reductive my dad could be, with his staid, financial definition of adulthood. *Of course* there wasn't a half-plant, half-man that existed only at Disneyworld. *Of course* my mom wouldn't tell me to poop for the rest of my life in one specific, barely-functioning bathroom that nobody else used because she had company in 1989. But I swear those things could happen. They did, by all rights, and I accepted them until I knew better.

I've seen that unlikeliness with my own eyes. It's just that my eyes were wrong.

I am only three years younger than my dad was when he became an adult by his own standards. More than those three years, more than money, more than my chosen

lifestyle (a student, *still*), more than maturity, separate me from being able to take a family of five on a vacation to Disneyworld. It isn't that I am not married, or that I don't have any kids or money. Compared with that deeper thing—the person I have grown up to be—those major situational hurdles seem small. Put simply, I cannot take a family of five to Disneyworld because of the way that I am.

And yet, in my quick judgment of the books that I read, even when I am wrong, I feel my father. In the way that I, while reading, make a shotgun of my thumb and forefinger and rest my chin in the trigger. My funny friend Jenny said she drove by me walking on campus the other day and waved from her car, but I didn't notice her. "You were walking so purposefully, it was hilarious. That walk was *ancestral*." I know exactly what I must have looked like, like my dad on his way to the commuter train at the end of our block train each morning. His arms brushed against his sides at break-neck speed, fast as a Dwight Gooden pitch, furious for no reason—epically furious, his fury visible from outer space.

I look like my dad, move like him and read like him, but I cannot dip my toe into the ocean of him; I never want to utter a sentence that gestures at explaining his life. The dead are behind a honeyed line ... *with a sweetness that cannot be explained*, and I am here, on this side. *The awe I feel* at the inevitable, brutally specific past, in its elegant form, stamped out in capitals:

RALPH TEMPLE CYCLIST CHAMPION TRICK RIDER

*

Having been burned by my ex-boyfriend's indifference, I know now, as Bishop knew at almost-six, to keep private that *unlikeliness* when it happens, and it happens all the time.

I don't mean to suggest that I go around looking for it, or forcing connections when they aren't there. I'm no glutton for *unlikeliness*. Let's say I'm reading a campus novel to get in the mood for school, and it's September 1 in the book and in my life. That doesn't count. And it doesn't count when a poem includes its date of composition and I happen read to pick up the poem on some anniversary of that date—exactly two or eight-nine years since it was written. I might think, "huh," but that's not waiting-room freaky.

Anyway, you never know with a poem. The first three lines of Allen Ginsberg's "America" are:

> America I've given you all and now I'm nothing.
>
> American two dollars and twentyseven cents January 17.
>
> I can't stand my own mind.

Ginsberg has a habit of including the date at the end of his poems, which means that a poem like "America" is double-stamped, with January 17 within the poem and "Berkeley, January 17, 1956," after its last line. So *maybe* I opened my little City Lights edition of *Howl* to "America" on January 17, 2013, led by the hand of *unlikeliness*, but I think I knew without knowing I knew that there was a January 17 waiting inside, having been told *twice*, textually and paratextually, whenever I had last read it.

Volumes of letters, journals, and diary entries are hardly worth mentioning in this regard, particularly since I rarely read them in order, the years neatly and boringly stacked. Instead, I flip through them at random, without knowing what I'm looking for. Maybe I'm seeking, among other things, some chunk of text that winks at *today*. And in a book with a date on nearly every page, finding such a wink is easy.

It doesn't seem *unlikely* to have encountered, in the wonderfully sweet-tart *Journals of Joyce Carol Oates,* a May 13, 1977 rumination on the meaning of May 13, 1977, on May 13 of this year. Oates writes,

> Keeping a journal isn't always pleasurable. What, then, stimulates the diarist to keep with it? A sense of order, perhaps. Curiosity. Years from now I can look back to May 13, 1977, to see what I was doing, or rather what I didn't do. And see myself at the age of thirty-eight years and eleven months gazing sightlessly into the future, toward an unfathomable future self.

No, not that.

What I'm talking about picking up Ron Rash's *The World Made Straight,* about which I knew nothing, on January 17, 2014, and finding that it is loosely organized around a character's interest in a Civil War battle that, I learn, took place on January 17, 1863. "It was Travis's idea to visit Shelton Laurel on the massacre's anniversary." But it wasn't *my* idea to read this book on the actual massacre's anniversary, or on the anniversary of the date that the fictional Travis thought to commemorate it.

Why is Rash's January 17 any more *unlikely* than Ginsberg's January 17? I think it has to do with Rash's deliberateness with that specific date—so *specific*—up against Ginsberg's habit of dating each of his many poems.

Then again, looking at *The World Made Straight* one more time, I note that there are a lot of days and dates in the novel. January 17 is definitely key, but on the novel's very first page, it's "a Saturday, the first week of August." There are scraps of journal entries throughout, each one dated. I can't quite recapture the *unlikeliness* I felt last January.

The sense of cosmic weirdness fades fast. When I return to Ford's "Empire," however, there is a *frisson* of *unlikeliness* buzzing around it. It's not just the memory of

those dates lining up; there is something about "Empire" itself. Ford's writing unsettles me like a worrisome sound coming from outside when it's too cold and late to go out and get to the bottom of it.

Longtime Ford fan that I am, I was shocked and fascinated by Colson Whitehead's takedown of Ford in *The New York Times* in 2002. Ostensibly, Whitehead's piece is a review of what was then Ford's latest book of short stories, *A Multitude of Sins*, but really it is more comprehensive than that, an assessment of Ford and why he doesn't matter.

> Dick Clark would sooner have a hair out of place than Richard Ford put a word where it shouldn't be. Everything is so perfectly arranged that over time, a formula for the Well-Crafted Short Story emerges, and one waits for the cheaters and the cheated-upon to take their marks.

Whitehead writes, in the spirited tones of someone who is sure he's right. He *is* right, I think. As much as I love Ford's writing, I agree with each of Whitehead's biting critiques. "The characters are nearly indistinguishable. If I were an epidemiologist, I'd say that some sort of spiritual epidemic had overtaken a segment of our nation's white middle-class professionals." At his worst, Ford isn't just banal, he's *aggressively* banal. His metaphors are heavy-handed. And he *does* overuse the word "something"—it's all true. Even in my favorite books of Ford's, like *The Sportswriter* and *Rock Springs*, there is the same flatness of tone, the same banality, the same white people. "Sometimes the men are named Roger or Tom, sometimes the women are named Nancy or Frances," Whitehead writes, implying that, despite giving his characters just-barely-distinguishable names, Ford doesn't bother to give them separate personalities.

Ford dances the fine line between ruthless attention to detail and outrageous self-absorption, constantly crossing over and back. As a reader of his, at this distance from

most of his specifics, I'm glad he risks it. I don't mind flirting with the possibility of nothing-at-all.

Unlikeliness, that worrisome sound. Who knows what reason Ford might have had for choosing September 18, out of the 365 days we are given? Not me. But reading "Empire," I felt spookily connected to *something*, although, like Ford's Sims, I lay "alone in a wide empire."

"Isn't that weird?" I say to my boyfriend. Isn't it weird that the night after I had a dream about that woman who stopped talking to me five years ago, *she emailed me?* Isn't it weird that the day—*the day*—after I Googled this guy I once slept with and never really thought of again, he *died?*

"Not really," he says.

"Not at all?"

"Not really."

"Not even just a little bit?"

"No."

Although I live by reading, most of what I've felt or experienced or thought I experienced, most of the places I've ever stood, nearly every date on the calendar, I haven't come across in the literature. Maybe they're not really suited to be written or read about, but they're suited to my particular calibration. I noticed them.

—August 4, 2015 – August 14, 2015

The Awe I Feel Is Not That You Won't Come Again, or Why

Or who

Would live here

Would do other

Than what I do

A woman taking a big blue bite of meat

A guy on a bike smiling

Talking on the phone

Or why oh why

In 81 the world was young

Scandals had all night to form

It rained constantly

Rinsing peoples' grief not washing it away

I came out of my mom

I didn't plan to

It just happened that way

ENVOY

Later

Later in life I will be more organized.

—Wayne Koestenbaum, “Privacy in the Films of Lana Turner”

This is about all the novels I will write later, when I’m a different person.

Later, when I’m a different person, I’ll write a historical novel about the Fugitive Poets. I’ll put in the part when Robert Lowell pitched a tent on Allen Tate’s lawn. I’ll have them, all nine, in the room together smoking, like the twelve angry men. I’ll imagine or even actually stand in the ornate rooms they inhabited at Vanderbilt and LSU. I’ll describe their weird rage and the fatherly hardness with which they held a poem down. *Nostalgia for nostalgia*: I remember the 50s-scented 80s. I will never see again those hard-wood benches or my tan grandma, young and shapely, playing tennis at the courts behind the University Club. Later, when I’m a different person, I’ll write about the Fugitive Poets and not insert myself into it.

Later, when I’m a different person, I’ll methodically go through Hawthorne’s *American Notebooks* and write the stories he didn’t get to. *Methodically*: with a method I haven’t invented yet, because it isn’t later. I won’t just look them up from time to time and page through them desultorily on archive.org. I’ll commit to Hawthorne, with my whole heart. I will write those stories for him. And in writing them, I will come to know him as I know I have it in me to do.

Henry James on Hawthorne: “the consciousness of *sin* was the most importunate fact of his life” (326).

Some of Hawthorne’s story ideas:

A person, while awake and in the business of life, to think highly of another, and place perfect confidence in him, but to be troubled with dreams in which this seeming friend appears to act the part of the most deadly enemy. Finally it is discovered that this dream character is the true one. The explanation would be—the soul’s instinctive perception. (*AN1* 268-9)

A recluse, like myself, or a prisoner, to measure time by the progress of sunshine through his chamber. (*AN1* 34)

The scene of a story or sketch to be laid within the light of a street lantern; the time, when the lamp is near going out; and the catastrophe to be simultaneous with the last flickering gleam. (*AN1* 14)

I will combine these two ideas in a single story:

To look at a beautiful girl, and picture all the lovers, in different situations, whose hearts are centered upon her… (*AN1* 136).

An old looking-glass. Somebody finds out the secret of making all the images that have been reflected in it pass back again across its surface. (*AN1* 134)

I just can’t picture anything about it right now, but once I was able to and I let the moment pass. Later I’ll see it again, the black iron flowers curling from the mirror and her beautiful parti-colored hair.

*

Hawthorne would have loved and hated the Internet. James would have been a natural online, posting on Facebook constantly and confoundingly, so that you would almost want to block him, but you would keep deciding not to, because for every fifteen Buzzfeed articles he shares, he posts his latest gloriously perfect *New York Review of Books* article, which he mysteriously dashed off despite being in the grips of what is clearly a severe social media addiction. But Hawthorne: He would have been one of those people who was too overwhelmed by his Facebook feed to say he was overwhelmed by it. It is never the people who claim to be overwhelmed who really are, anyway. He wouldn't announce it on Facebook when his stories were in the *Atlantic* or the *North American Review*. He would have started out never posting because he wouldn't have understood how the whole thing worked. It would have taken him an unusually long time to figure out how social media operated; what was supposedly "intuitive" he would not have found to be so. Even after he got a sense of the lay of the land, however, he would have hung back. He would compose posts and save them as drafts in MS word, forever. He would feel angry, and angry at himself for feeling angry, as he scrolled through his feed, writers not as talented as he, Poe, Stowe, Fanny Fern, crowing over their not-as-impressive publications. Exhausted, worn to the bone in "the sultry heat of society"—the same heat by which other people prospered (*AN1* 37).

*

James's Hawthorne is "gentle." Compared with James, though, anyone would seem gentle. James with his active, ironic sensibility, his Swiss Army knife of 1,000

tools, a specific tool for any semantic occasion, James plopped on a divan dictating *The Wings of the Dove* to Theodora Bosanquet all afternoon without even a pause for a glass of water.

But out from under James's retrospective shadow, for all Hawthorne's gentleness, there is something *ungentle* about Hawthorne, too. *Calm down*, my mom used to tell me when she came into my bedroom at night. I was lying in bed, not doing or saying anything, but she must have known the terrible things I was thinking, the terrible way my heart was beating.

Hawthorne was like that. He couldn't *calm down* enough to fit in at Brooks Farm. In his writing, an afternoon or a day doesn't just *pass*, it "declines"—or he "murders" it (*AN1* 283, 3).

In a letter to his college friend Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who was much more successful during their lifetimes, Hawthorne writes, "You give me more credit that I deserve in supposing that I have led a studious life. I have indeed turned over a good many books, but in so desultory a way that it cannot be called study, nor has it left me the fruits of study" (qtd. in James 360).

Moving around papers around all day, dusting books, thinking of other, more productive writers, starting scraps of fragments, nothing accumulating, checking my email again—oh, Longfellow, when will my "writing life" begin?

I tire easily. I mean I am *exhausted*. Hawthorne was so exhausted by the time he got to Italy, he took seven years to gather the strength to begin the journey home. By then his life was nearly over.

*

Later in life, I'll write a sequel to James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, a trashy bestseller like *Scarlett*, called *Isabel*. It will be one of those thick hardcovers at the library, bendy at the spine, with the title in shiny silver letters on the front. I'll know for a fact what happened, where she has gone, all these years I've been trying to discover.

"What happens at the end?" I asked the professor.

"You don't know?" he said, but he didn't tell me.

I'll burst open the secret and tell everybody.

*

In "The Custom House," his introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne writes of the place "where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other. Ghosts might enter here without affrighting us" (31). He begins "The Custom House" asserting, nearly apologizing for, the uncharacteristic "autobiographical impulse" that has taken ahold of him, but somewhere along the line, fact becomes fiction (2).

I would live in "The Custom House," critical autobiography that leaves its door open and lets dream blow in.

At that threshold is where the books I will write, later, take place.

Later in life I'll write a novel in the form of a writer's journals. The writer is fictional, but his journal is full of responses to real, recently published books.

Later in life, I'll loosen up as an academic writer, find a voice.

Later in life, I'll critique without anger. I'll hide my hatred, do away with it.

Later in life, I will figure out what fills the books I read, and then I'll do that, too.

*

Hawthorne's "shadowy stuff," the dark and gruesome world lying behind sunlight, I see; I agree (James 360). Looking with a squinched face at how disgusting it all is: "It is strange how few good faces there are in the world, comparatively to the ugly ones" (*AN1* 9).

In dusty houses, old women named Hepzibah reside. Why *wouldn't* their names be Hepzibah? it's so ugly, and the world is ugly. "One very fashionable in appearance, with a handsome cane, happened to stop by me and lift up his foot, and I noticed that the sole of his boot (which was exquisitely polished) was all worn out." (*AN1* 6)

John Cheever, from "Goodbye, My Brother": "Oh, what can you do with a man like that? What can you do? How can you dissuade his eye in a crowd from seeking out the cheek with acne, the infirm hand; how can you teach him to respond to the inestimable greatness of the race, the harsh surface beauty of life; how can you put his finger for him on the obdurate truths before which fear and horror are powerless?" (14)

*

I want to write those stories Hawthorne didn't get to because, in his journals entries, his ideas for stories, his characters, his histories, I feel him—in multiple senses of that term, in the way people say colloquially, "I feel you." He was so perpetually, by-nature disappointed—and yet he had *wonder*. Even if only at "the process by which sober

truth gradually strips off all the beautiful draperies" (*AN1* 14). In that combination of disappointment and wonder: *I feel him*.

He wasn't strong like Thoreau, or right like Emerson, or brave like Margaret Fuller. Melville, hot and panting with genius and complicated feelings, star of the twenty-first century, banged at Hawthorne's door and Hawthorne slipped out the back. Hawthorne's very name is indelibly associated with his comment about *damned scribbling women* blocking his path to publication. He opposed the Civil War. He was on the other side, shy, backward-looking to a fault.

To make one's own reflection in a mirror the subject of a story. (*AN1* 20)

An essay on the misery of being always under a mask. A veil may be needful, but never a mask. (*AN1* 32)

A man tries to be happy in love; he cannot sincerely give his heart, and the affair seems all a dream. In domestic life, the same; in politics, a seeming patriot; bit still he is sincere, and all seems like a theatre. (*AN1* 103)

*

In Boston for a little trip, Hawthorne looked around with his dusty country face. "Apartments of private families in the hotel,—what sort of domesticity there may be in them; eating in public, with no board of their own. The gas that lights the rest of the house lights them also, in the chandelier from the ceiling (*AN1* 138)." I'm closer to him and this scene he paints than I am to Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe at the Chelsea

Hotel. My friend was so excited after she read *Just Kids*. She asked if I wanted to go to New York with her and be an artist. No. I don't want the gas that lights the rest of the house to light me, too. I want my own gas, no sharing. ("A perception, for a moment, of one's eventual and moral self, as if it were another person" (*AN1* 156).) To be left in "cool solitude," without collaboration (*AN1* 37). To "keep the inmost Me behind its veil" ("Custom" 2).

*

Poor Hawthorne, there was so little to be distracted by. Mindless entertainment was a giant rat in a cage at a fair.

Later, there will only be more distraction. That might be all there'll be. I might not get to any of this.

Later, I won't worry so much over the exact right word. Better that it be written in the first place than that every part be perfect. Right now, though, I keep going over and over everything I do, unmaking it,

and so I must wait patiently until later.

*

Later, I will pitch one-hour dramas to CBS based on Hawthorne's ideas:

"A man living a wicked life in one place, and simultaneously a virtuous and religious one in another" (*AN1* 132). ***LAX to PDX*** (New. Starring: Peter Gallagher). Bill Hathorne flies up the West Coast to a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood in Portland every Thursday, where he is the wildly popular Head Minister at a nondenominational church;

the rest of the week he spends bilking clients out of millions as a corrupt superstar sports agent. When a local Portland reporter discovers his secret, the fragile balance between his two lives threatens to tumble.

"A partially insane man to believe himself the Provincial Governor or other great official of Massachusetts. The scene might be the Province House." (*AN1* 135-6) ***Governor Brown*.** (New. Starring: Hannibal Burress). George Brown, a popular resident of a suburban facility for adults with special needs, has long believed himself to be Governor of Massachusetts. But now, he's campaigning—and his message is picking up steam against an incumbent with delusions of his own.

*

Later in life, I'll write about President Polk at Hawthorne's deathbed, two mild men of the mid-century.

Later in life, life will feel longer. I'll believe it when I hear that life is long.

Later, I will set a book at Lab School. Not a day goes by that I don't think of it. I will exhume it. I'll find the language. But the longer I wait, the more minor and major constellations show me:

I am no longer a child.

Later in life I'll write a book that takes place in this dream-alley I inhabit, I don't yet have any way to say it. Throwing words at it, "We never got it on any dated calendar day" (Emerson 1192-3).

*

The present and the future are the past

—Frank Bidart, “Poem in the Stanza of the Rubaiyat”

The rap on Hawthorne is that he was haunted by his Puritan ancestors. Listen, says Hawthorne, I live and will die where they died, and so “the attachment which I speak of is the mere sensuous sympathy of dust for dust.” (“Custom” 6). Alive, he watched, with “wonder,” a drunk stumble from the bar (*AN2* 226).

The pages that he wrote on are yellow, the color of the nineteenth century. An indigenous American criticism was just beginning. The deepest thing was soup bowl. Now men sail to the bottom of the sea.

It is already later, what will I do?

Later, I won’t be so panicked. I’ll *calm down*. I will write a novel that takes place in a single day where nothing special happens, just to show how long a day is, all the possibilities panning out from a single second. It’s just that I don’t feel that way right now.

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ABSTRACT

The dissertation combines narrative, scholarly, and lyric modes to explore its author's life in American literature. From Mary Rowlandson's twenty "removes" to Joan Didion's migraines, the project locates sources of a personal epistemology in the American literature that has haunted its author. While the primary form of the dissertation is the creative nonfiction essay, it also includes prose poems and scholarship. Blending poetry with narrative and criticism with autobiography, the dissertation breaks down the boundary between literature and self by blurring genre. Alongside formally experimental essays, the dissertation includes two traditionally conceived scholarly essays, both of which analyze contemporary creative writers who work at the boundaries between forms and genres to establish their own authorship. An essay on short stories by Joyce Carol Oates and Cynthia Ozick about Henry James argues that the productively slippery generic designation "biofiction" allows Oates and Ozick to combine criticism with fiction. The dissertation's second scholarly essay examines the receptions of booklength experiments in lyric feminist autobiography by Lyn Hejinian and Bernadette Mayer, arguing for a criticism that embraces the ideological and formal expansiveness of Hejinian's and Mayer's "open" texts. Both essays argue that creative writing works with—and often *as*—criticism, particularly in interpreting pre-twentieth-century writers for contemporary readers. Presenting scholarly argument alongside mixed-genre creative writing, the dissertation offers an example of how crossing genres and disciplines can lead to descriptions of American literature and American literary history that are both more

expansive and more detailed.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lucy Diamond Biederman grew up in Chicago, the daughter of William Biederman and Patricia Schulman. Like her parents, she attended Washington University in St. Louis, where she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature in 2003. In 2010 she received a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing, with a specialization in poetry, from George Mason University. In 2016 she earned a doctorate in English from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.