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PERSONAL STATEMENT

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Emma Winsor Wood

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The Dissertation of Emma Winsor Wood
is approved:

Professor Micah Perks, chair

Professor Carla Freccero

Professor Chris Chen

Peter F. Biehl
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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Personal Statement

"Personal Statement," is a book of short essays in the vein of Rivka Galchen's *Little Labors*, Heidi Julavits's *The Folded Clock*, and Kate Zambreno's *Screen Tests*. The spare, poetic essays, loosely based on the form of the 650-word personal statement prospective students must write to gain admittance to college, aims to subvert and interrogate the form while also interrogating the ways we construct—and are asked to construct—a coherent self. The essays meditate on time and aging, sex and marriage, friendship and loneliness, art and ambition—all while circling the question of what it means to be female in the 21st century.

Supplemental Essays

The critical essays in this section historicize and contextualize the work I am doing with the personal essay in my creative manuscript.

In the first essay, "'I am not a melodramatic person': Defining the lyric diary," I propose and define a new genre in contemporary literature: the lyric diary—a slender volume in which a depressed female first-person narrator, usually a mother, records the mundane and trivial experiences of her everyday life alongside facts, ideas, and quotations in flat, affectless "shreds" of prose. Blending elements of the confessional poem with the diary and other non-literary modes of historical women's writing (the scrapbook, the date book, the account book, the family Bible), the lyric diary rejects plot and the narrative arc for the lyric's associative logic ("tell all the

Truth but tell it slant") and the diary's serial, episodic movement—frustrating many readers in the process. Where the confessional poets possess what could be characterized as an excess of feeling, the lyric diarists display a lack where the usual full-to-bursting expressive lyric "I" would be. Their narrators do not narrate: they record.

The second essay "An Interlude—"A Lovely Woman Tapers Off Into a Fish": Monstrosity in Montaigne's *Essais*" explores similar themes as the prior chapter—birth, gender, femininity, the body—in the context of Montaigne's work. In it, I discuss the monstrous nature of Montaigne's essays, both in terms of the material book and their form, and argue that, throughout the book, the *Essais* are fashioned as a kind of "enfant monstrueux"—a male child, a son, born unnaturally, of one man, alone.

The third essay "It's Not Personal: Understanding the Personal Statement" serves as a critical introduction to "Personal Statement." In it, I examine the social and cultural implications of the form of the application essay and discuss the ways that writing into the form resonates with the manuscript's themes and goals.

Personal Statement

Emma Winsor Wood

Over a number of years you behave in so many ways that in the end
No matter what people say of you, they're right.
– Dan Poppick

Think your own thoughts…and speak them as plainly as you can.
– Virginia Woolf

I am not excessively fond of either salads or fruits, except melons.
– Michel de Montaigne

To the reader

We often encourage starting with a "framing anecdote"—a brief story that serves to set up the larger narrative of the essay.

It was 2 a.m. on a sticky summer night when I finished the first draft of my first personal statement—the essay I would submit to every college via the Common Application, a mere 650 words that would determine my future. I was stretched out on my stomach on my bedroom floor, my throat parched, my contacts sticking to my eyeballs, but I was thrilled, in the way every writer is immediately after the act of creation. *I'm a genius!* I'm sure I thought. And, *My essay is brilliant!* And, inevitably, *I'm done!* Laptop triumphantly shut, contacts removed, teeth brushed, I slept like Shakespeare after a good lay.

Then try 'zooming out'—giving some context—what's going on, on a larger scale? How can you set up the rest of the essay? What's the main story? Note: We recommend focusing on a single *story.*

For the past three years, I have been helping high school students brainstorm, write, and polish their college application essays. It is not, as I like to say dryly when first telling people about this job, 'god's work', but it pays well. Which is one way of saying the clients—parents and students alike—tend to be wealthy and entitled, either too confident in their own writing skills to accept my edits, or too lazy to do any of the work I prompt of them, forcing me to be more 'hands on' editorially than I prefer. Though I don't write entire essays for anyone, the ethics can still seem questionable; I

am helping shape and create their voice, not just polishing but improving their often-shallow reflections and baggy narratives.

Still, through this work, I have come to love the personal statement. In its ideal form, it is not simply a *statement*, nor a formulaic creation, but a true personal essay, one that emerges from the tradition started by Montaigne so many centuries ago. Through it, students are able to explore an experience, an idea or a feeling they don't yet understand—to attempt, through the drafting process, to move through the discomfort of unknowing into knowing, with the knowledge that that knowing is partial and biased. And it all happens in only 650 words—a strict limit that forces concision, clarity, and new connections.

In the final paragraph or two, you want to focus on reflection: why is this story important? What did you learn or take away from it? You want to show self-awareness and also growth; that you are able to learn from your experiences and change.

Though the personal statement has the potential to be a truly transformative and valuable piece of writing, it is also, necessarily, a sales pitch: *Look at me!* the personal statement demands. *Look how smart, unusual, thoughtful, self-aware, mature, passionate, hard-working, generous, and/or kind I am! Look what I've done! Look who I've become!* Because of this, though the writer may write about her flaws and failures, she can only do so in a narrative of self-redemption and self-improvement. She cannot be entirely honest or truthful; she must wear a mask while appearing not to.

In these essays, I have set out to explore the form as a writer rather than as an applicant—without the pressure to 'sell' myself, to create tidy narratives of change and self-improvement, what kind of essays could I write in (approximately) 650 words? What sort of self, unmasked might appear?

In the final moments, consider looking back to the opening—or 'framing'—anecdote. Can you do so in a natural way that provides closure to the reader?

In the personal statement I finished that sticky summer night, I described my quest to "find myself" by studying other Emmas, from both history and fiction. As a statement it's okay—the concept is creative, smart—but it's not really an essay at all because I didn't discover anything in writing it: I was showing off.

In the essays that follow, regardless how you judge the outcome, I can say, with confidence, that I learned from them and through them. That I tried.

Expecting

My husband and I are expecting a baby. A daughter. Both waiting and not waiting for her, wanting her to come and wanting to delay her arrival as long as possible as we try to finish everything there is left to do in the months we have left (five, four, three, two…). It feels like that—terminal.

We are expecting a baby: I am pregnant. 20 weeks, 21 weeks, 22 weeks, 23….

After the first trimester, they start to go by more quickly. I am looking forward to the third, when, I hear, they slow down again.

I keep having to remind myself that a child doesn't signal the end of your life, doesn't have to signal the end of your life, if you don't want it to.

I don't want it to—though I want it, want her.

But what exactly do I want, wanting her? An experience, a distraction, a change, a test, a proof? A link, a lock, a love, a conventional life, life?

We have been expecting a baby for five months now. But I have been expecting a baby for much longer—

Memory: nine or ten, playing "mother" with Elizabeth, with the doll that cries, drinks "milk," and pisses itself.

Memory: I was always the mother when we played house, "ironing" and scolding.

But, even now, though I edit a magazine of writing by children, I can count on two hands the number of times I've babysat. I can't even change a diaper. Not that it

really matters—if I like kids, or even if I know about them or how to care for them. Other people's kids have little to do with your own, and anyway I'm a diligent student and a quick learner.

Whenever I feel anxiety about becoming a parent—and worse, a mother—I remind myself that everyone does this, or nearly. And yet now, because it is Happening to Me, it feels exceptional, almost miraculous. That is how it goes. *If you are not a fish, how can you tell if fish are happy?*

When I began this manuscript, "we" were not expecting. But I was. I had been wanting a baby, preparing and pressing my husband for one, for months—a year or two. We were waiting until the timing was right, or better. Until he felt more like I did—willing, if not ready.

My goal was always to have a book published, or at least under contract, before I had, or thought of having, a baby. A book seemed like some kind of insurance, a guarantee. Having established myself as a "writer," I wouldn't need to fear losing that to motherhood.

Instead—we got pregnant. I have an app that counts down the days until our daughter is supposed to arrive, and though I have three finished manuscripts, I still have zero books. I know it is writing, not publishing, that makes one a writer. But the writing is mostly invisible to everyone else. The book is the proof.

When I began this manuscript, I was not pregnant, but I could already feel my days as a daughter were numbered. Soon I'd be a mother, a person with a past instead of a future. My daughter would be the future. And I would have to live in her world.

But now, I am trying to hold on for just a little bit longer. Trying to remember, to understand. Before it's too late. Before I no longer care about understanding anything except this small being, this person, now growing and kicking inside me.

One
Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, please share your story.

That's me

I was supposed to be an Emily. When my parents called my grandfather to announce my birth and my name, he responded, "Emily, you mean?"

"No," they said: "Emma."

"For short?"

"No… Just Emma."

My mom had chosen the name with the family name in mind—I was an Emma Winsor and my great-grandmother had been an Emily Winsor—but she preferred Emma and since she loved Jane Austen, she wanted me to be an Emma Wood—so close to *Emma*'s Emma Woodhouse.

Growing up, I didn't like being an Emma; how regular, how boring, how tame! I wanted a name with some spunk—a name that sounded like a hair flip, an eye roll, a dramatic sigh, a thrown glass shattering on a wall across the room. I wanted to be a Penny, a Lily, a Rose. Oh, to be named a noun! Then there would be a fixed referent; then I could point to, outside of myself, and say, "That's me."

Now, I dislike the name for another reason: it's been one of the most popular baby names for a few years. I become less and less unique by the day.

But, growing up, I didn't know many other Emma's. In grade school, there was me; in the grade below, there was red-haired Emma C— (later, we were at the same college, two Emma's from "the city"); and there was the glamorous upperclassman Emma Marwood, her long brown hair perennially styled in a perfect messy bun (a ponytail folded into a single loop on the top of her head, the hair

beneath slightly puffed out beneath its weight), her bellybutton visible as her tight tank top rode up her torso. We took modern dance together, four days a week, after class, in the school auditorium, all the bleachers folded up so we could spread out on the hardwood floor. We barely ever spoke but I admired her from afar: she wasn't the prettiest girl in the room, but she had that vividness and presence that made you want to be near her, that made her popular, that made me daydream about being friends with her.

By the time I was her age (14!), I had perfected her look, joking around with my friends while effortlessly (but very knowingly) knotting my hair loosely on top of my head, my tank riding up as my arms lifted to reveal the tiny hole of my belly button in the middle of my flat flat teenaged stomach. But, though I tried to tell myself otherwise, I knew I hadn't—couldn't—acquire that whatever-it-was that had drawn me to her in the first place. I was not special; I was normal. I could never be Emma Marwood; I was Emma Wood.

Emma was these two grade-school girls, and she was also a dog owned by a distant relative: a small, sturdy Norfolk Terrier, her wiry hair the color of a dull penny, who bit my hand, when I was nine or ten, sitting on the floor in front of the fireplace at my uncle's house. This seemed like a significant event: a novelistic kind of moment that seemed to indicate…what? That the self can be against the self? That even dogs don't always love you back? That "I" is different from "me"?

Well, let me just say: There is a famous scene in *Jane Eyre* where Jane, then nine, is locked inside the Red Room at night after biting her cousin. Crossing it at one

point, she catches sight of herself in the looking-glass. It is not herself, not Jane, whom she sees but a "strange little figure…with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, [which] had the effect of a real spirit: [she] thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp."

It was something like that?

I refused to do most things

I didn't learn how to ride a bike until I was 12, and not for lack of trying. I remember trepidatiously mounting the purple two-wheeler my parents bought for $100 at Toys R' Us and peddling slowly along, my dad running beside me. I remember realizing my dad wasn't there and falling sideways on the pavement, skinning both knees. This was our yearly ritual, and afterward, I walked everywhere, barefoot and usually alone.

I grew up in a city where very few kids ever ride bikes but spent a portion of my summers in a small Connecticut town that's only about a mile and a half from tip to stub. Now I'm an adult, the distances seem less than insignificant. But, as a child, my legs were shorter, and time moved slower. Gangs of kids roamed the town all summer, and no one but me—except very occasionally, and probably with parents—on foot.

In many ways, refusing to learn how to ride a bike was emblematic of who I was: reserved or shy, independent or a loner, tenacious or stubborn, brave or fearful, depending on how you saw it.

I refused to do a lot of things back then, most of them athletic: to sail, to ski, to dive, to jump to the high bar in gymnastics. To say I "refused" is to make me sound like I had agency, like I was standing up for myself, like I was something more than a wimp, a chicken, a wuss. But I wasn't. I was all of those derogatory terms. I was afraid—afraid of falling, of failing, of getting hurt, of embarrassing myself. Afraid, most of all and without then knowing it, that learning to ride a bike wouldn't suddenly make me fit in with one of the groups, with Darcy and Meg, Sarah and Carolyn. Afraid of being uncool, friendless—and not by choice.

I wasn't a generally fearful child. I always raised my hand first in class, streaked across the backyard naked at midnight when dared to, ate everything that was placed in front of me. Social and intellectual risks didn't scare me, or at least they did, and do, but not as much, not as noticeably. It was physical risk that truly terrified.

This is the part where I blame my gender for this fear. I remember my grandmother refusing to let me go swimming or running alone the summer she stayed in Stonington with my brother and me. I remember my mother telling me not to walk even a block and a half in my bikini, for fear I might attract the "wrong kind" of attention. Even now, she warns me ("Don't overdo it") when I set out for a run on a hot summer day. For a long time, I believed I was delicate and the world, dangerous.

This fear has circumscribed my physical existence for as long as I can recall. I ran (mostly on roads). I rode horses (the old reliable ones). I lifted weights (only carefully increasing the load). I danced (modern; amateurishly). All of these activities require certain characteristics I'm proud of but they come without the risks—and, so,

I guess, the rewards—of contact or team sports, one with balls and bodies hurtling toward you. To this day, I have yet to break a bone.

I can't remember the exact moment when I "learned" to ride a bike, when I got on and stayed on. Looking back, I think—or maybe, of course, I knew—how to ride a bike the whole time. I just hadn't yet accepted biking as a "safe" activity, one I was permitted to do, one I could do, without fear.

Neither a Swallow nor an Amazon

When I young, I really wanted to be the kind of girl who sailed. Not just one who sailed but who went on daylong adventures to small uninhabited islands and then sailed home after dark, tanned, sleepy, unafraid. Though this fantasy was strongly derivative of *Swallows and Amazons*, it was still my fantasy—or at least one I shared with Caroline, one of my best friends.

The worst part was that nothing was stopping me; I could, if I wanted, be a sailor. In the summer, my parents rented a house in the small coastal town of Stonington, Connecticut, where my brother and I would live for a month or so. On one end of town was the yacht club, a term too grand for what it was—four tennis courts, a collection of blue-painted wood buildings, and some boat slips, on a spit of residentially-undesirable land next to the train tracks, where the New York-Boston train whizzed by four or five times a day. Every summer, the club offered lessons in swimming, tennis, and sailing. My brother and I were always signed up for these lessons. I dreaded all of them because I was shy, which often came off as standoffish, and I had no friends. Still, tennis, swimming—I didn't mind too much. The one I truly dreaded—and the one my dad, who had sailed competitively in college, cared the most about—was sailing.

I wanted to be the kind of girl who sailed. But sailing, like riding a bike, terrified me. This fear was not a rational fear, though I pretended it was. For instance, when my dad would ask what I was so scared of, I would say capsizing. He would tell me capsizing really wasn't a big deal; it happened all the time; the boat could be

righted pretty easily, or, if not, you were always safe in the harbor if you knew how to swim, or, he'd say, you can always wear a life jacket if you want; that way you know you'll float, no matter what.

But, I'd say, what if the mast or the boom hit me? What if I got stuck in a line? What if I got stuck *under* the boat?

When he did succeed in getting me out on a boat (I would always occasionally capitulate to my desire to be a sailor in spite of my fear of sailing), and the boat heeled—that is, when it tipped as a result of the wind on the sails, sometimes so far it stood almost at a right angle to the water, *as it should*—I would inhale sharply, my hands flying up to the rigging, my breathing suddenly erratic and strange.

Look, Emma, my dad would say, I can control what the boat does. See if I let out the mainsheet… [he did so] it flattens out [it did; I could breathe again].

The problem was that my fear wasn't rational. No matter how many times my dad demonstrated that he was in control, when the boat heeled, I would invariably inhale sharply, my hands flying up to the rigging, my breathing becoming erratic and strange, sometimes a shrill command of "Stop, stop" involuntarily escaping the hole in my face.

Once back on stable, predictable land (on the East coast, there are rarely earthquakes), I always felt frustrated, ashamed, disappointed, and confused, and I could feel my dad's disappointment and confusion too. He didn't understand what scared me—or why I was scared in the first place. I didn't really understand it either. I wanted to be carefree, unafraid, good at sailing. Every time I went out, I thought

maybe this time I would be able to sit there, my limbs loose, my eyes crinkling into a smile. But instead, every time I went out, I ran into the wall that separated who I wanted to be from who I was. I was many things, but I was not relaxed or bold in the face of the elements, not daring, not care-free, neither a Swallow nor an Amazon.

The kind of sport artistic bookish girls could do

I can't remember when I first started loving horses. I just did.

At school, my best friend Caroline and I would often pretend we *were* horses: using the belts from our uniform tunics as reins, we took turns "riding" each other; we perfected the whinny (you have to use the back of your throat); we ate green salads for lunch without utensils; and, of course, we read all the classics: *Black Beauty, The Black Stallion, National Velvet, My Friend Flicka, The Pony Club*.

I wish I could remember which came first: reading about horses or loving them. Most likely, they were simultaneous, one feeding into the other. The books I read—including the non-horsey 19th-century novels where horses were ever-present, if only as a way of getting around—made me want to ride, and riding made me want to read about horses. Riding was, in my mind—again probably because of 19th-century novels and the sidesaddle riding skirts I'd seen in old paintings—a romantic activity. It wasn't for jocks, like basketball or soccer. It was graceful, girlish. It was the kind of sport artistic, bookish girls could do.

For me, riding was also aspirational. I didn't take physical risks, but I wanted to be the kind of girl who did. And riding, though looked down on by my soccer-player husband as a "pseudo-sport," was more dangerous than most "real" sports. One could fall and get kicked in the head or trampled or simply land the wrong way and puncture a lung or fracture the spine. Even just being around horses was dangerous—they could kick you or bite you, step on your foot or push you up against a wall. I was keenly aware of all of these possibilities; even when I was having fun on a horse—

galloping through a field or cantering figure-eights in a ring—I never fully lost sight of everything that could go wrong.

What I loved about horses was also what I feared in them—their wildness. Even the dullest lesson pony could suddenly startle and gallop away or buck with joy or frustration. The ultimate dream was not to "break" that wildness, but to gentle it just enough so that you, and only you, could manage the horse.

This was why *The Black Stallion* was our favorite of all the horse books: in it, a shipwrecked boy washes up on a desert island with the horse he freed from the hold—a fiery black Arabian stallion. Alec, the boy, must win the trust of the stallion he nicknames "the Black," and the two form a close bond. When Alec is eventually rescued, the horse comes home with him, where it becomes clear he is not tame. He is only tame for Alec.

Perhaps young girls dream about horses because they are taught to dream about love, but they can't have love yet. So they go looking for it elsewhere.

The dog we had growing up was obsessed with my mom; he followed her everywhere. I used to put his leash on and drag him around the house with *me*. I wanted that kind of love. It was the same with horses: Alec and his stallion were soulmates. I must've known I wasn't going to find my soulmate riding lesson horses, but I could pretend, just as I did with boys at the time, that there was something between us. Proximity was enough. The daydream was enough.

Sullen, challenging, mean

For a long time, I said *Anna Karenina* was my favorite book—when friends asked, when strangers asked, when websites asked so that they could later verify my identity. Now I say, "I used to say it was *Anna Karenina* but I haven't read it since college and things might have changed." But I don't definitively say it is not *Anna Karenina*, and I don't name any other books.

I read *Anna Karenina* three times in fairly quick succession. Anna, as always, was my favorite character. I saw myself in her; I wrote a series of persona poems *as* her. How did I, as a 17-year-old, a 19-year-old, a 22-year-old, just beginning my life, see myself in a married woman and mother, bored with her existence and driven to an adulterous affair which leads to her social isolation and eventual suicide?

The first time, I was 17, a brooding romantic who had nothing to brood about. I had just gotten back from a trip to St. Petersburg, where I had begun to learn Russian (it was the most brooding and romantic country I could think of). Back home, I raced through my parents' beaten-up Signet Classic. Before I finished, someone casually mentioned Anna's suicide (news to me); I was furious. The book was small and thick, and the cover image, a painting in murky shades of yellow and brown, depicted a woman looking into a vanity mirror; the overall effect was one of darkness. And I loved it, I loved her, I fell in love.

It was then, 13 years ago, that I started saying *Anna Karenina* was my favorite book, and Tolstoy, my favorite writer.

The second time was sophomore year in college, for a course on the 19th-century novel. We read Austen, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Zola, and, of course, Tolstoy. Again, I read my parents' copy, but a newer one: the latest translation, which had won awards and earned—or at least received—a celebrity recommendation that had re-launched the novel, 127 years after publication, into something of a moment.

I finished it for the second time well before the two weeks we'd been allotted were up. This edition of the book had heft; it was both tall and thick with fancy deckled edges, the ones publishers usually reserve for the books they want to announce as literary. The cover—a lilac flower resting between a woman's bare knees, in tones of light grey—has since become iconic. My copy looked anything but: Once I was done with it, pink Post-its jutted from its fancy edges, its cover was scuffed and dinged, its spine creased, its pages punctuated with circles, stars, underlines, and inane notes in every color.

The third time I read it was senior year, for a seminar focused entirely on *Anna Karenina*. It was my dream class. We read the novel in the original Russian alongside early drafts and other works by Tolstoy.

Scrolling through images of various Russian versions of the novel on Google Images, I can't decide which edition I read—the one from the Library of World Literature, that shows a woman in a pale pink dress leaning her head tragically against her dance partner's shoulder (lightness)? The paperback that shows a woman in a burgundy dress in full profile, the shadows lengthening around her (darkness)?

The one from which Anna stares out at you, from beneath a white feathered hat, her gaze sullen, challenging, mean?

I realize only now, as I write, that the answer to this question—of what drew me to Anna—is simple and obvious. At heart, Anna (like her brother Stiva) is a teenager: impulsive, moody, melodramatic, self-centered, jealous. So was I. And so, like her, I was prone to see myself as a tragic figure, even though, like Anna's, my life had been nothing but incredibly lucky, full of bourgeois comfort, privilege, and ease.

Reading *Anna Karenina* alongside other 19th-century novels had taught me, like some 21st-century Emma Bovary, that tragedy—forced separation, heartbreak, unrequited love, suicide, early death—was romantic, and that it was beautiful. More beautiful and more powerful than happiness. It is a lesson I am still trying to unlearn.

Speaking not singing

"You're not singing; you're speaking," the voice coach said, once I'd finished the song I'd rehearsed and rehearsed. "Stand up straight, put your arms out, and do it again—in a higher key."

Trembling, I spread my arms and tried to sing. By which I mean something resembling song—that I thought resembled song—was emerging from my mouth, but my arms wouldn't stay put.

Though I was as diligent a student in music class as in every other class, though I practiced opening and closing my mouth at the correct intervals along with everyone else, I have never really known how to stretch sounds out so they float—become music. In my mouth, the sounds remained words.

When I was nine or ten, my music teacher—the one teacher I couldn't make like me—singled me out from a chorus for being off-key. She asked me to get up and stand by the piano and sing the piece again, alone. Afterward, she lit into my voice. It seemed unfair to be humiliated in front of the class for something I felt physically incapable of doing—like shaming the slowest girl in track. After that, I mouthed the words whenever I knew I could get away with it.

Now, I was a seventeen-year-old in acting school, again forced to sing in front of my class, again being—or feeling—humiliated.

I stopped, started, stopped, said I couldn't do it. The teacher, her mouth a straight line, looked around the room and pointed to the two biggest guys in the class. "You and you," she said. "Get up there and hold back her arms."

They silently complied, with strained expressions; we were friends.

"Once again, from the top."

Pull the ripcord

The ship has lost its sail—

The next line got lost in a sob. It was painful to sing like this, literally pried open and forced to confront my own inability to do a thing most children can do easily and well. I was good at speaking; I could hide there, behind the words, clothed in whatever persona or character I had decided to project. With singing, it was the opposite. Singing in public made me feel like an open field the wind could rip through at any time.

Once, at summer camp, my friends had me sing with headphones on so they could laugh at whatever monstrous sounds emerged from my throat, sounds the headphones made me deaf to.

Once, a boy told me he loved to hear me sing.

The men let go, looked questioningly at the instructor.

"Again," she said.

I wiped my nose with the back of my hand and the men grabbed my wrists and I spread my feet, took a deep breath, and started over.

Pull the ripcord

The ship has lost its sail

Your momma's got a new man

Your daddy always fails

And you're eating again alone

Cause nobody loves you

And even fancy things have finally lost their charm

Wine and diamond rings, they never get you anymore

You're sleeping again, alone, cause nobody loves you

I began crying again almost immediately, but softly, and so I kept singing, my lips salty.

The singing wasn't *good,* but it was better.

And ooh ooh ooh

They should have seen you

Should have known you

Should've know what it was like to be you

So come on kid
Look at what you did
I don't know if you meant it, but you did yourself in And I was even having a good day
When I found out we lost you

So aye aye aye
Oh oh oh and yeah yeah yeah
yeah yeah oh oh

She said it was in the singing and the strumming
Oh man I even saw it coming

On long drives as a kid, my mom, my dad, my brother, and I used to play "the singing game": we would go around in a circle, each person picking a song and singing it, the rest of the family joining in once they realized what it was. I can't remember if there was a competitive element—did the first person to guess the song win? did you 'lose' if you forgot the lyrics?—but, whatever the reality was, I prefer remembering it just like that—no competition, no rules, just singing, and the pleasure we got from it.

I finished and returned, shakily, to my seat.

“It’s an internal thing—some paralysis”

My grandfather, Clem, married twice: first to Jane, my biological grandmother, for about twelve years, and then again to the woman he left my grandmother for—my step-grandmother, Jessie. They were married for the rest of his life—nearly thirty years.

Neither he nor Jessie ever held a traditional job, and so they spent their days together; they were rarely ever apart. When I was a child, Clem would bring Jessie breakfast in bed as she completed the *New York Times* crossword. People who knew them still remark on what a *wonderful couple* they made. I notice this kind of comment seems to make my father uncomfortable. Usually very talkative, he perfunctorily stretches his lips into something approximating a smile (no teeth) and lets out a short “Hm.”

A few years ago, I interviewed a number of people who had known my grandfather for an essay I was writing about him. My grandfather was a typical writer: he did not quite live up to his promise. At that point in time, I was interested in why that was the case. Now that I’m farther along in my writing life, the question no longer seems so interesting to me, but the answers I got still are. A number of people inevitably blamed his inherited money; others (and relatedly) a lack of will. But I was surprised a few also talked about Jessie. “Oh, she didn’t care whether he was a successful writer or not,” I recall one person saying. “She just wanted to live the lifestyle of an artist, to have a *salon,* to be surrounded by interesting people, artists and intellectuals, like her mother.” Another talked about how demanding Jessie could

be (I thought of the breakfast in bed), and how that "surely" put a strain on Clem's time.

This bothered me. First of all, it didn't make sense. My grandfather had published nothing while with his first wife, and two novels while with Jessie. He had even dedicated his first novel to her: "To Jessie, for getting our hero back on his horse." Secondly, Jessie was an artist, too, a painter—she even exhibited in Paris after Clem had died. She knew how the whole artist thing worked. Basically, it seemed like lazy misogyny: if a man fails to live up to his "promise," blame the wife.

I was relieved when one interviewee dismissed such accusations. "It's unfair," she said, "to pass judgment on someone's ability or inability to write. I have found some of the very best writers I've had as students have not gone on to pursue it. They would write 50 pages of a brilliant novel, and just quit. 'My mother got sick/my dog died/I had a baby.' I realized it had nothing to do with externals. It's not that. It's an internal thing—some paralysis."

When I was conducting the interviews, I was working fulltime and dating an investment banker who thought the idea of me as a writer was "cute"; now, I'm married to another writer. We both teach and freelance, which means we don't go into an office and most of our time is unstructured. On a typical day, we spend ten hours together.

I have a fear, not of being paralyzed by my husband, but of paralyzing *him*, of being not the Vera Nabokov but the wife you haven't heard of because her petty demands on his time prevented her husband from becoming the great writer he

should've been. I am constantly reminding myself that, though our fates and lives are intertwined, his success or failure is on him, just as my own is on me.

The moody, mysterious muse

For the longest time, I thought since I wanted to be a writer so badly it must mean that everyone wanted to be a writer. And if everyone wanted to be a writer, there was no hope for me.

I idolized my grandfather because he had been a writer, though my parents wouldn't yet let me read his novels. Otherwise, I read what I wanted—mostly long 19th-century novels: *Vanity Fair, The Count of Monte Cristo, Middlemarch, Wuthering Heights.* When I started reading *War and Peace,* my middle school teachers said I had gone too far and tried to stop me, until my parents intervened. I wonder what offended them—that I wouldn't *really* understand it? Was I somehow desecrating a serious text by attempting to read it as a child? In any case, it was over my head. I got bored and quietly put it down 75 pages in.

After that, though, I got wise to the system. We were required to read 30 minutes per night and record our progress in a reading journal. I would simply record another, more "age appropriate" book that I had already read, while secretly reading another book that might have been forbidden.

I never liked being a child. I was always quiet, serious, "mature"; in all my daydreams, I was "grown-up." I read to extend those daydreams, to experience the adult emotions I so desperately wanted to feel—romantic love and desire, yearning, grief, joy, jealousy, anger-verging-on-passion. I think some people want to be writers, and so they read; I wanted to be a writer because I read.

I look back on that time as a kind of Golden Age of reading, and one that was crucial to my development as a writer. All those hours I spent eagerly turning the page to find out *what happened next*, I was absorbing vocabulary, pacing, and complex sentence structures, storing them away for future use.

Like most people, I romanticized the writer. To me, she (though more frequently "he") seemed like an otherworldly being with a direct link to the moody and mysterious Muse—what I called inspiration. In high school, I wrote all the time—papers, of course, but also articles for our weekly school paper, plus the occasional lab and in-class essay. But I didn't connect that kind of writing with the writing of Literature and certainly never thought that being good at academic writing or journalism had any bearing on my future as a creative writer—a future that still seemed inaccessible to me.

I wish I could say there was an epiphany moment—a flipped switch, an "aha," a suddenly-illuminated bulb—when I learned otherwise, but there wasn't. Instead, it was a gradual brightening, the way, on a grey day, you barely notice the sun rising until it's directly overhead. I had peers who wanted to be writers—for whom this seemed possible—and they weren't so different from me. I began to take liberties with my academic essays, to respond creatively to critical prompts (in response to one of these experiment, one teacher gave me an "A" though told me not to try it again). Eventually, I mustered the courage to take a writing class.

It was this first writing class, on the personal essay, that confirmed the still-only-sneaking suspicion that the writing life was not entirely out of reach for me.

Writing wasn't easy, but it also wasn't sacred. I learned that inspiration wasn't entirely a myth but that the less I wrote, the less it appeared. Like everything else on the planet, it mostly came down to hard work, and I knew how to work.

Force x Distance

In physics, work is calculated by multiplying the force by the amount of movement of an object (W = F * D).

Sitting and looking at a computer screen is not work. Tapping on the keyboard and making the keys move is work.

When I was a kid, on Saturdays, I'd go around asking my parents if they had any *real work* for me—filing, transcribing, stuffing envelopes. I didn't mind a tedious task as long as the stakes were real, not make-believe.

In the summers, my step-grandmother would pay us a nickel for every weed we pulled up by the root. One year, my cousins staged a protest, holding up signs about forced child labor along the road. It was labor, but it didn't feel like *real work* to me.

Driving to your job is not work, but the energy your car's engine uses to move the car is work. You have to exert a force and move something to qualify as "doing work."

The first real job I had was as an intern for a company that manufactured tiny, delicate dolls dressed in elaborate gowns. When I worked there, the company's office and factory were still located in their original Harlem building. I had my own cubicle, PC desktop computer, and company email. My main task was a research project about the doll market; I gradually filled a binder with images and printouts, savoring it, this one non-menial project I was assigned.

Otherwise, I didn't have much to do, and spent a lot of time in the factory, where an older, longtime employee had taken me under her wing. She was mainly a Spanish-speaker, with some English; I had no Spanish. Our relationship was mostly nonverbal, but she was my friend.

My friend tried to teach me how to tie the perfect bow—for it was tiny satin bows, not black plastic twist ties, that kept the dolls securely fixed to their boxes. I could never master it, though we both pretended I had, and we would sit together, tying bows. I suspected that, after I left, she would re-tie all of mine. Other days, I sat at my desk and bought discounted low-tier-designer clothes online, spending my money as I earned it.

Holding a box requires effort but no work. Lifting a box requires effort and work.

Holding a book open in front of the sun requires effort but no work. Moving the book as the sun moves requires effort and work.

Transferring money from one bank account to another is not work.

The best job I've had was as an assistant literary scout in New York City; basically, my job was to read, then write about, books. It's the only office job I've ever held. The worst job I've had was as a researcher for a lifelong learning start-up. The work consisted of watching YouTube videos on topics that didn't interest me and filling out spreadsheets. My best work story is getting fired from my position as assistant baker for a small San Francisco café for using baking soda instead of baking powder in a batch of cupcakes. The job you would least expect me to have had was as

a reporter for *FarmJournal,* an agricultural newspaper. Being a teacher is the hardest job I've ever had. Writing literary guides for SparkNotes is the job that felt least like a job.

I was wrong, as a child, to equate *real work* with office work. Now, the only work that's real to me is *my work,* the work no one pays me for. This work.

I opted to go

I started boarding school when I was 14. I had opted to go to boarding school; it wasn't a punishment, as people I met outside of the Northeast occasionally thought. I had opted to go partly because I wanted to be like my brother, who was a senior at Andover, and like my father, who had gone to St. Paul's, and my grandfather, who had also gone to St. Paul's, and partly because I wanted to be like the protagonists in the books I loved—*Vanity Fair*, *Jane Eyre*, *A Little Princess*—and partly because I was in a hurry to grow up, and I thought boarding school would give me the independence I always craved, and because even then I could sense there was something toxic about New York City high schools.

I had opted to go to Andover, and I was excited to be there. But, at night especially, that excitement often felt theoretical. I missed home—my parents' apartment in New York City, my parents, New York City.

Whenever I thought about home, and what I missed about it, I saw myself standing barefoot, in cotton shorts and an oversized t-shirt, on the threshold to our long, narrow kitchen, the matte checker tiles mutely shining beneath the overhead lights, my dad standing—also barefoot, in khaki shorts and a faded orange polo—in front of the stove, waiting for his broccoli to steam. It is late, and I know I should be in bed, and I derive a faint pleasure from staying up past my bedtime as I stand there, talking to my dad about what we read in the day's *New York Times*, or school or work or books or running.

Over the years, this small scene has become shorthand for home. And, when I first moved to Andover, I summoned it all the time.

Andover—both the school and the town, but especially the school—seemed enormous at first. I can see now this was partly a consequence of its newness; once a space is familiar, it inevitably appears smaller, contained somehow. But at first, it was foreign, and so the Sanctuary—a woodland area preserved for birds, with a three-mile walking path along its circumference—seemed to rival Central Park, and the health center—which was maybe a mile and a half, at most, from my dorm—seemed impossibly far away, and we called the playing fields on the edge of campus—where I didn't even venture until junior or senior year—"Siberia."

It seemed enormous not only because it was uncharted but because we were still so young. Back then, a mile seemed a substantial distance to walk or run; now, my shortest runs are six. If it took more than ten minutes to walk anywhere—ten minutes that felt like what? 20 to me now? more?—it seemed impossibly far; it was Siberia.

When I went back for my ten-year reunion, what struck me most was not how small it all seemed (though it did) or how short the distances actually were, but how when we arrived, I thought—somewhere deep in my gut—*I'm home*.

Now, when I feel homesick, I sometimes picture my dad in his orange polo steaming his broccoli, and I sometimes picture myself lying on my red-and-white striped rug in my senior-year dorm room at Andover, listening to Rilo Kiley.

I guess home is always somewhere—"some other place, some / some other time not this one" (Creeley, "For Love") even when it's nominally here. Right here.

Opposite and equal reaction

Growing up, my brother was neat, and I was messy. His hair was combed flat; mine was perpetually snarled in the back. He colored obsessively within the lines; I, willfully over them. And, of course, he tidied up, while I left my discarded toys or clothes wherever I happened to put them down.

But when I was a child, someone always picked up after me. I'm sure I was corrected occasionally, told to pick up or put things back, and I always had to rinse my dishes, though I preferred to leave them soaking in the sink, but, back then, there were no consequences for being messy; if I didn't do it, someone else would. So, until I moved out of my parents' house, to go to boarding school in 9th grade, I was a messy person.

Away at school, I slept in a small, rectangular room that opened onto a large, shared common room. The walls were white cinderblocks, so you had no choice but to hang up posters and pictures with sticky tack, and the carpet was a dark grayish-blue that hid stains and dirt. Living on my own for the first time, I became neat—though this may have been less an act of will than a desire to pass room inspection. A couple of my close friends always failed, and, while I didn't mind being in their rooms, sitting on a nest of discarded clothes and rumpled bedding, a plug-in air freshener ineptly masking the stale smell, I was always relieved to return to my own room, the bed made and the small side window cranked open as far as it would go, even in winter.

At boarding school, even when I had roommates, I always had my own room, and so I got used to living alone as a teenager, to having a place for everything and having everything in its place. In college, I shared a room for one year, as a freshman. That was it. Later, when I got a boyfriend, I cleaned up after him, because living in his mess—as I pretty much was—bothered me. Now, I still think of myself as a neat, clean person, but I've relaxed my standards; living with other people—my husband plus two dogs and two roommates—will do that.

For me, it's not just about ignoring the mess, but about ignoring my urge to clean—because, by now, I actually *like* to do it—to see the way the porcelain toilet bowl turns from grayish to white, to marvel at the amount of dirt and dog hair in the vacuum canister, to have all the laundry clean and newly folded, in its rightful place. With cleaning, there is the illusion of being "done," of having completed *something*, an illusion I don't often get to enjoy. In writing, there is always more to be done (a famous writer once said, you never finish a poem, you simply abandon it). With cleaning, you vacuum and you scrub, and the difference is immediately noticeable, and the work is indisputably done: the room transforms, often more quickly than you expected, from dirty to clean. I'm not thinking once I've finished about how quickly the room will slide backward from clean to dirty, nor that, a cleaner's work, like a writer's work, is never truly done (everything tends toward chaos). I'm simply tired and happy, looking around at all the clean, straight rugs and carefully-folded blankets, thinking that now, now the space has been cleared, the dirt removed from the carpet,

as if from my own brain, or somewhere else in the core of my being, now, I am ready to work.

First personal statement

(Written upon applying to colleges, at age eighteen)

As a girl, I imagined an invisible cord, which stretched across time and reality and tied my fate to illustrious and infamous Emmas, dead, alive, and fictitious alike.

However, as I grew older and realized the widespread use of my name, I began to lose faith in the sacred union of Emma. I realized that it was impossible for so many women to share the same unique bond, so my relationship with Emma evolved. Instead of romantically admiring the famous Emmas from afar, I began to dissect them, measure myself against them, and mark our similarities and differences. And so, at the malleable age of twelve, I embarked on a journey to piece myself together with attributes stolen from an assortment of Emmas.

I began with my original namesake: Jane Austen's Emma Woodhouse. After devouring both the book and film, I had grown to love Ms. Woodhouse's slightly frustrating yet endearing exploits and "disposition to think a little too well of herself." I admired her intelligence, wit, vitality, and recognized her ability to learn lessons and change.

I grew up in a cerebral environment surrounded by books and English majors; thus, I always harbored an insatiable hunger for words. Despite my background, I began to doubt the "coolness" of my intellectual passions upon entering junior high at my somewhat superficial all-girls' school. However, Emma Woodhouse, as a popular and attractive girl who proudly displayed her intelligence, inspired me to embrace my own intellect rather than feign other interests.

Having acquired this treasure from Austen, I jumped eagerly to what I might glean from Gustave Flaubert's tragically romantic Emma Bovary. While rejecting Emma Bovary's self-absorption and frivolous goals, like her I imagined myself dependent upon romance, mental stimulation, and beauty. Since my childhood, I have admired artwork and ancient civilizations in countless museums. I have followed romantic paths to reach romantic goals and aspired to challenge myself in every possible way. I have hungered to see everything beautiful and different, to feel everything genuine and surreal, to touch all of these things, and for all of these things to touch me.

Born and raised in one of the cultural capitals of the world, I could hardly envision myself in her position: married to an uninteresting man in a town lacking culture and stimulation. I knew that if I found myself in such a situation, my voracious cultural appetite could also drive me to desperate measures. At the same time, I knew that I could never find myself in her position: the world, even in an apparently dull place, can still fascinate beyond belief.

My journey continued for several more years. Jumping from pop singer Emma Bunton of the Spice Girls to the eighteenth-century socialite Lady Emma Hamilton to the inflammatory "Red" Emma Goldman, I filled my pockets to the seams with wisdom.

Like a raven, I scavenged for their shiniest attributes and most constructive experiences. What I found was beautiful and valuable, yet I realized I could neither take their characteristics nor substitute their experiences for my own. In my

eagerness, I had underestimated the value of personal experience and the uncontrollable effects of outside factors.

I had set out on this voyage to remake myself in the image of fellow Emmas; instead, I realized that I should focus on creating, rather than remaking, myself. Perhaps in the process I too will become an Emma—hopefully illustrious rather than infamous—worthy enough to serve as a model to future generations of Emmas.

Two

The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

“Had we both been sober and willing”

Subj: Last Letter

Dear Emma,

I figure now that school is done and I no longer have to deal with the shitty social consequences of being honest I can finally explain myself. My timing is less than perfect, it’s 2 30 AM, I’m fucked up from finishing the last 5 Percocet, and I’m sure you have vowed to yourself never to talk to me again. I'm sorry if what I say upsets you, but it has been on my mind for over a year. Here is the last letter I will write you.

For all my life I have been the failed romantic. I have fallen hard for girls only to find that they aren’t interested. Or they are interested in other guys. Sometimes they are my best friends. I cannot count the number of times I’ve felt crushed by another girl’s actions. Yet for some reason last spring I found a girl who I liked, and to my surprise expressed interest in me. I know you were high and drunk at the Allman Brothers concert, and I was too, but I had also never been so excited or scared in my life. For the first time ever I kissed a girl, a girl that I really liked, a girl that I thought liked me. I was nervous as fuck, and as we kissed my leg shook uncontrollably. I was so nervous and scared that I had to stop. I didn't know what to do. I was confused. I stopped, and immediately regretted it. That ten second kiss was the best ten seconds of my life.

I tried to play it cool but of course I couldn’t. I didn’t know how I could get another chance to be with you. Things turned bad as soon as we got back to school and I found you avoiding me. I became embarrassed whenever I saw you in

Commons or on the path. I wanted to tell you how I felt then but I couldn't because I was scared. I figured with the summer I would get over you.

I was wrong. I spent every day thinking about you, wanting to talk to you. Even though I had begun to realize how little I meant to you I didn't care. I thought you were amazing. When we came back to school I wanted to once again play it cool, but that failed. I did what I could. I asked you to breakfasts, to the movies, to hang out every once in a while. Almost all the time the answer was no, assuming I could even get you to pick up your phone. Every time we did hang out, it made me the happiest guy in the world.

At the same time, I found myself becoming a mess. Junior spring I went for weeks getting high every day, couldn't sleep at night, and constantly thought about hanging myself in my closet. I had no idea what to do with myself or my emotions. The fall and winter I drank myself stupid. The nights where I'd see you walk off hand in hand with some other guy were the nights I'd get plastered and wake up with bruises all over my body. Every time I'd think I was making progress with you I would hear from B or L about how creepy and stupid you thought I was. I wanted to be angry at you but instead I was angry at myself. Clearly I was letting you down somehow, and I just wanted to figure out how.

My second chance never came. I waited and waited, did everything I could think of. I started to realize that you would never feel for me the same way I felt for you. I sent you roses on Valentine's day, not because I wanted to impress you, but because I wanted to make you happy. As pathetic as it sounds, that was all I really

wanted for you. The problem was I was selfish enough to want me to be the one to make you happy.

This spring I changed a lot. I started hooking up with girls, almost found a girlfriend, lost my virginity, and of course broke my leg and was essentially kicked out from school. As I realized that there were other girls out there I couldn't help but realize that I still had feelings for you. When you came to visit me in the health center it meant the world to me, and realized that even if you did not feel the same about me as I felt about you, I would still treasure your friendship. On top of being incredibly pretty, you are also incredibly smart and incredibly fun to be around. I hoped that you would at least give me a chance at being your friend, and for once, the odds looked good.

While I'm not particularly proud of my behavior during grad party week, it was Thursday night's events that have been eating away at me. I've seen so many guys get drunk and take advantage of girls, and when it happens it makes me sick. I've detested these guys to an extreme. On Thursday night I became one of those guys. I don't know what it was that made me behave the way I did. Whether it was the shock of discovering that it was you in the bedroom with C, the number or beers and painkillers in my system, or the fact that I had been slowly seeing my morals slip all term whenever I drink, I do not know. I wish I could understand what motivated me to kiss you and bring you into the room. Emma, had we both been sober and willing that could have been the greatest night of my life. Instead, the next morning I woke up feeling like the scum of the earth.

You have fucked with my head more than any other person I know, and despite this I still love you. This past year has been so frustrating for me. But not for an instant have I ever wished ill upon you. It doesn't matter how drunk I was, I am absolutely ashamed of myself. To the best of my understanding I have loved you for over a year and still do, and to make you feel this way feels like the worse thing I've ever done. I don't give two shits about getting the boot from school. I have let down the one person I love, and for me there is nothing worse.

At this point this is probably the last thing you want to hear. I have been feeling awful during the days, and haven't been able to sleep at night. I'm hoping that by being completely honest with you I can not only tell you what I've been meaning to all this time, but to finally get it off my chest. Emma, I am not the guy you saw on Thursday night. I am the guy who deeply respects you for who you are and your amazing qualities. I know you said you were mortified over your behavior, and that's fine, but I cannot emphasize enough that you are still Emma Wood, the girl who is smart, beautiful, and even though her taste in music is questionably emo at times, still manages to be a pleasure to spend time with. I know this last letter has been long and rambling, but I had a lot to say. I wish you all the best in your travels, your year off, and your time at college. I don't know when I will ever see or hear from you again, but I hope that in time you will be able to forgive me. Perhaps even someday we can be friends. Enjoy your summer.

Love Always,

D

Re: Last Letter

oh d——, i'm afraid i don't have time for a long response - and i'm sorry if i can't do your email justice - but i hope you are no longer facing sleepless nights and please please, i feel terrible about my behavior, too, as much as i would like to blame the boy, it was my fault, too. and i'm sorry that it happened, but i would much rather be semi taken advantaged of by you than anyone ever because at least you respect me and care and i mean i'm upset it happened, but i can understand how frustrating i/this must have been and how it could sort of drive you to that. so please don't beat yourself up.

anyway, i have to go. hope things are well otherwise though.

emma

Where are u

You are aware of having been cut off from the world, but the world isn't aware of having been cut off from you.

It was the text messages that gave me away.

11:01 p.m. where are u

When you drink a lot of alcohol very quickly, the brain receptors that create memories go dark. The moment is only ever happening.

11:22 p.m. where are u

11:46 p.m. where are u

Often, when people black out, they do all kinds of things they regret in the morning.

When I blacked out—nearly every weekend my freshman year at college—my night usually ended: somehow, I got home, stripped naked—I always stripped naked, in spite of my roommate—and went to sleep.

One Sunday, Diana came up to me in the dining hall and asked about "the creepy guy from the other night."

What creepy guy.

Sometimes I woke up with vomit on my pillow.

Sometimes I woke up to learn that my roommates had taken care of me, guided me to the toilet, held my hair back.

Once, there was a note from a girl who'd been visiting for the night: "Hope you feel better, Emma! Text me when you wake up :)"

I was lucky I always woke up.

Every Sunday, I would read all my text messages from the night prior then drag myself to brunch, find my friends, find out what happened: there was a thrill to not knowing, to having your actions narrated back to you as if you were a protagonist in someone else's fiction. And there was the relief of feeling like I'd surrendering responsibility—if I had no memory of an action and no mind to speak of while acting, was it even me who had acted?

I was always disappointed to learn that invariably, around the point where the night faded into a blank, I'd just gone home.

For years, people had been telling me I was cold, prim, aloof, serious, quiet, and for years, I had used reading to be someone, anyone, else. In college, I used reading—and drinking. Unfortunately, drinking was even better: it meant I could be someone else while still being in the real world. Sort of.

12:01 a.m. lol where are u

When you're blackout, you're still yourself. You just don't know it.

One night, I forgot too much. I left a party with my friend's boyfriend.

She never forgave me. Over ten years later, to remember it still feels like poking a fresh bruise. I lost that friendship to what… lust? Competition? Insecurity? I could cry about it but there was no one to pity me—I had brought it upon myself; I had made my own lunch.

Why had I done that? Who was I?

I was tired of not knowing. I turned on the harsh overhead light and stripped naked before the mirror. I sat down and made myself comfortable.

I made myself look.

Shameless

At first, I thought I was not easily embarrassed—that, in fact, I actually enjoyed being embarrassed: all eyes turned toward my flushed cheeks with no expectations, with nothing but an exclamation or guffaw, perhaps an empathetic blush, and me at the center, the match that set it all alight.

Except what I am describing here is not what it feels like to be embarrassed. What I am describing is what it feels like to share a story or a fact that others might find embarrassing but that I do not. In other words, it is not that I am not easily embarrassed; it is rather that I have no shame—or less than others.

Most of what fails to give me shame is about sex. I will happily tell you about how and when I lost my virginity (the sonnet I wrote about it during grad school was discussed by a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet in front of an audience of at least 40 people). I'll tell you about the time my then-boyfriend and I had sex in New York's Botanical Garden in broad daylight or the time I gave him a hand job on a crowded Peter Pan bus. Actually, all of these experiences went into the sonnets. Perhaps that's partly why they no longer give me shame. I've already exposed them and experiences, once exposed to the light, begin to fade, like Polaroids.

Of course, the other, maybe more obvious, reason I don't feel shame around sex is that I was (1) raised secular (2) in a time when feminism finally became mainstream. Suddenly, no one who was anyone in my particular cultural bubble wanted girls and women to feel any shame—especially about sex and their bodies. Men were the ones gifted that particular burden: men are now the ones taught to feel

shame for sex, for their bodies, for taking up space. Nothing got better. The load was simply redistributed. (Is that how it always works?)

Of course, I do get embarrassed. I do feel shame. Those are the moments I don't want to tell you about, though many of them aren't as salacious, as exciting as the stories I've already told.

For instance, I am actually ashamed of having once been promiscuous, even though I am lucky enough to have been instructed not to feel this shame, and therefore pretend I do not.

Of course, I am ashamed; what else would have compelled me to write about it obsessively?

Still, there are some experiences I won't write about, some I keep private. Those are the worst of all. They are like wounds kept under too tight a bandage—without air to dry them out, they grow hot; they weep pus; they become infected.

Appendix:

Virginity (I)

Since he had a girlfriend (now gay), we met
just inside the chapel doors,
only to descend the stairs separately, like spies, or,
in truth, I forget,
but I think it was morning
& dye still streaked my blonde hair black
when he laid me, blank
as lore, swarming
w/ the weight of being
self-aware,
onto the bluish industrial carpet, where
he pushed back my skirt &, for a fleeting,
fumbled, unseeing—the pang, a cry, *Yes, keep going, I'm fine*,
& the discovery, a few hours later, of my rug-burned spine.

Virginity (II)

Sex *has* scarred me forever:
the carpet in the basement of the chapel
scraped my spine dappled,
i.e. pain, the ruler against which I measure
all pleasure, notched my body
into his split tally
that I might carry
w/ in me his copy:
eyes black as pupils, condom, bloodied,
the twinge transformed, perfection mourned…
Out, out damned you know—the muddied
etc. is our lot.
Later he told me he…Well, whatever, it was
an afterthought.

To transport with delight, to enrapture. *Obsolete*.

I spent eight hours a week, all four years of college, sitting in an uncomfortable futon in a basement room with one wall painted to look like the sky, waiting for a knock on the door or a ring on the telephone.

I was a peer counselor for a group specifically trained to talk to students who had experienced sexual assault, sexual harassment, or domestic violence. Our big secret was that we rarely ever got a call or a drop-in; sometimes we waited a whole semester without a single ring from the landline in the basement or the flip phone we each had responsibility for one night a week. One call a semester was a lot of activity for us. I remember my boyfriend at the time, a self-proclaimed feminist, said peer counseling was a waste of my time and encouraged me to quit. It was pretty much the only extracurricular I did.

Every semester, counselors were required to participate in a 72-hour training. Seven of my eight semesters at college began with this training—with the educational binder full of horrifying statistics about college women and rape; with the video that explained not all men are rapists but rape culture enables the few that are to float under the radar; with our own personal stories of assault and harassment; with suicide training. We were taught to reflect the caller's language ("What happened after he 'groped' you?"), to affirm their statements ("Wow, that sounds really tough"), support their actions ("You did the right thing"), sit through long silences and, in the case of a suicide risk, calmly try to talk them into revealing their name or location.

My favorite part of training was the role-plays. A pair of us would sit in the center, back-to-back, one assigned to the role of the caller, and the other, to counselor. Another peer would hand the caller a piece of paper with the situation she would have to act out, while the counselor went in blind, having to feel out the situation, just as she would in real life, with an actual call. I'd always loved acting, and I could work myself into tears pretending I had just been raped.

By freshman spring, the semester I became a peer counselor, I had been raped four times. I had called Response once, late one night, before joining the team—*ring, ring, ring*: no answer.

Usually, when I want to write about a thing, I describe it. But here the facts… don't capture… the experience? Convey the affect? Are too brutal, not brutal enough?

Writers are expected to plumb the depths of their souls etc., and yet the depths are the hardest to accurately…

I guess there's a reason we say we "couldn't put it into words."

And especially, for me, in prose—poetry seems to have more room for the uncertainty, the gray area, the blankness that trauma (was it "trauma"?) leaves behind. Or maybe it's that my usual prosaic approach—tell the facts and tell them straight—won't work here. The facts are the facts; they don't show you what it was like; they don't make you feel things: *Aujourd'hui, maman est morte.*

But it's also that I'm afraid of these facts, ashamed of them. The truth is: for a couple years, I was a slut. Or… how else could I say it—"sex-positive"? "Exploring a newfound sexual desire"? "Experimenting"? "Open to possibilities"? Or has "slut" been reclaimed now, a badge I'm supposed to want to wear?

Either way: I was a slut—I can't unhear the awfulness of that word—its closeness to *slit*—to slit her throat, to put it in her slit, to slit your eyes in judgement—and didn't that open me, as every pursuit does, to certain risks? To rape? It's hard to believe, even all these years later, it wasn't still somehow my fault.

Appendix:

lesson

What can I possibly teach you? Nothing
cut-dried
ever happens to me,
or I've an exquisite intricate painting for a mind,
the opposite of a *grisaille,*
though *Guernica*'s one, so the comparison
doesn't hold… But you get the picture: I'm feminine.
& he, I thought, a gentleman—
still, I thought—
or, rather, no—*think* I didn't, really, at all—
He had a British accent! He was so tall!
……
*
Starched winter. Morning sun. My body lugs me
from point a to point b, like a ferry / on a / body of / water.

Enemy territory

I started writing poetry because of a break-up. That fall, when school started back up, I submitted some of my work to be considered for admission to a poetry workshop. I was thrilled and surprised when I was accepted.

I should note here that there are two kinds of writers: those who are immediately proud of what they've just written and think it is incredible, and those who hate what they've just written because they know, either through perception, experience, or insecurity, that it needs work. Back then, I fell into the former category, in large part because people had been praising my writing, in any genre, throughout my life.

The first poem I had up for workshop went like this:

You came through forest, field, wall –
Not a panther but a wound on the

Panther's paw. A cherry ribbon
Of blood wound into a me, into a

Bowl of glass almost breaking
Under the swaying shadow of a kiss.

Again we are coming to the tea's leaving,
To the panther, to his paws not marking

Forest walls with still alarms but
Crying to the crier, *I want to come to you*

A ripe lover and not not leave
A white tree blossoming alone.

To me, it was yet another break-up poem. I was surprised when it confounded the class. One student, a very serious young poet who admired Keats, Eliot, Pound, etc,

said the poem didn't make sense and held up a small diagram he had attempted to draw of the blood winding into "a bowl of glass almost breaking." It had never occurred to me that a poem needed to make any sort of *sense*. At that time, I saw language as gestural, and a poem as successful so long as it could conjure a mood. Another student, slightly less serious but highly—intimidatingly—intelligent said, with great confidence, that it was clearly a loss-of-virginity poem, and no one objected; in fact, they accepted this reading, relieved to have one on the table that made some *sense*, and the conversation built from there.

I was mortified. It was the first time I realized that once a text leaves your hands, it can be read in any number of terrible, "incorrect" ways, that my intentions—at least when it came to poetry—truly didn't matter. With prose, I already knew it was different. As an academic writer, I was meticulous, connecting every single dot so that readers could clearly grasp my interpretation. That was the point of academic writing: to effectively communicate your (hopefully unique and nuanced) analysis. The point was *not* leaving room for interpretation. In that moment, in that classroom, I saw I had entered enemy territory. The readers were the enemy. In workshop, the author was dead, even if she was sitting right there.

That evening, I called the telephone number our teacher, L, had so generously provided us. I was so upset, so embarrassed, so convinced the whole class saw me as a sophomoric wannabe poet—so self-centered—that I didn't want to go back to class. I explained everything to L, who very kindly and very gently told me I needed to grow thicker skin—and that I would. That I was new to all this.

What else did she say? Maybe that how others read a poem reflects more often on them and their experiences than on the writer. Maybe that these "incorrect" readings are a kind of feedback; if you don't like what you hear, revise, rewrite. Maybe also that if you wanted to be a writer, and perhaps especially a poet, you had to accept that, once the work leaves your desk, it's no longer just yours. It belongs to the readers, too. And you have to let them have it. Even if they get it all wrong. And, usually, they do.

Faraway and unfamiliar

I am in Russia, I am sitting on a bench in a public park, scribbling in a lined black notebook. I am sitting on the bank of a small stream where ducks are languidly gliding. I am sitting on a tiny balcony above a busy street on a hot day. I am sitting in bed even though I think it might have bedbugs. I am sitting at a desk with an oval mirror hanging over it. I am sitting on the river wall, next to a canal, on a wood bench, on a metal bench, in the sun, in the shade, in a playground, by a church, white fluff from the poplars floating around me as if I were in a dream, buzz saws humming somewhere to the north, or cars, a child's cry, unlocatable, far off, the sun in front of the clouds, now behind it. I am sitting somewhere in a city in Russia writing in my notebook.

I spent at least three weeks in Russia, in St. Petersburg mostly, in the summers of 2007, 2009, 2010, and 2011. I was a serious student of the Russian language because I was trying to be a serious student of its history and literature. I wrote about the poetry of Tiutchev and Fet, the "poetry" of Tolstoy, the poetry of Pasternak, the "poetry" of Tarkovsky, the poetry of Elena Shvarts, a Soviet writer you probably haven't heard of; "She's dead but contemporary," I would usually say. The darkness of the "Russian soul" fascinated me, as did the idea of St. Petersburg, the golden, beautiful city—"Venice of the North"—built on the corpses of its laborers. The U.S. didn't have that kind of history; our souls were light, airy, uncomplicated.

Or mine was. Or I thought mine was. After all, didn't we also have that history—wasn't the city where I'd grown up, built on the bodies of slaughtered

indigenous people? I couldn't see it because it was too close, too familiar. Or I chose not to see it because I wanted to feel light, airy, and uncomplicated, even though I told myself I wanted to be otherwise, even though I often tied myself in knots just so I could undo them.

Russia, though! Russia was so far it was barely Europe. It lived just on the edge of my imagination, but not outside of it; it was in the West, just the Eastern part of it. When I was there, I was someone else. I spoke Russian and tried to look Russian—to set my face in a resting frown, to carry myself very straight and upright, to wear heels everywhere I went. I often scanned the faces around me and wondered: could they tell I was American, or was I "passing"? I was happiest when a stranger addressed me in Russian, and I was able to answer back without revealing my foreignness.

Once, I found a man's wallet on a train and held it up above my head and asked the nearest person if it was theirs. Soon the whole train car was asking who had lost it, passing the message along in a game of telephone in which nothing—magically—is lost, and when the message finally reached its owner, he came down the aisle, parting the crowds, and tried to crush rubles into my hand as he thanked me—*spasiba bolshaya, spasiba*—profusely, and I nodded and smiled and refused the money, and he kept speaking to me in Russian, never once indicating to me that he thought I might not understand.

I had travelled in Europe by the time I first went to Russia but it still felt truly remote in a way London, Paris, or Rome didn't—I think because Russia was off of

my parents' map. My dad had lived in Paris as a child, and my grandmother had lived in Switzerland and the South of France for a time, and my dad's step-brother lived in London with his family, and for all of these reasons, Western Europe felt close and familiar to them. Russia was different: they knew no one who lived there; there was no safety net; no one to check in on me, give me hand. When I was alone there, I was truly alone.

I always saw the four years I studied Russian in college as an isolated event, walled off from the rest of my life, including my decision to become a writer. I always thought I could just as easily have majored in English or Italian, replacing Tolstoy with Shakespeare or Dante. And perhaps this is true. But, if I had travelled to Florence or London, I would not have been alone in the same way. And it was in, and from, that loneliness that I began to sit on benches across the city and fill lined black notebooks with writing that was not journalism or history paper or analytical essay. It was something else. It was my own.

A pig watches the sausage get made

Like many young aspiring writers, I decided I wanted to work in book publishing after college. The summer after graduation, I was lucky enough to get an internship at W.W. Norton.

I was thrilled to be there but my duties were unremarkable; mostly, I made copies and stuck labels onto envelopes for large promotional mailings. Occasionally, I was trusted with reading proposals and writing up a reader's report. The highlight was the atmosphere: I was surrounded by books, and by others who loved them as I did. At least one other intern also harbored dreams of being a writer, and we spoke about our writing and about our dreams of attending MFA programs sometime in what seemed like the faraway future. I had been interviewing for a "real" job all summer and, at the start of September, only a few weeks after the internship had ended, I got one. I was going to work as a literary scout.

If a book is a stone dropped on the pond of the publishing industry, creating ripples in the form of concentric circles, the literary scout represents the ripple furthest out. Scouts are hired by foreign publishers—where I worked, our clients included publishing houses based in Germany, Italy, Spain, the UK, Norway, the Netherlands, and Brazil—to advise them on what American books to buy based on their respective brands and markets. These houses already have foreign rights representatives whose job consists of finding books and brokering deals. But the biggest houses need a scout, too—eyes and ears on the ground in New York City, where all the major American publishing agencies and houses live, to tell them about

the hot new book that sold at auction for a million dollars and to get them a contraband copy of the manuscript so they can make an offer before one of their competitors. As scouts, we might *help* a publisher or agent sell the foreign rights to a book, but we aren't directly involved in any deals. We're middlemen, gathering information and passing it on, reading books and making recommendations.

The best scouts, and I count my previous boss as one, often end up serving an even more valuable role as a consultant on all sorts of topics—brand strategy, editorial direction, "list" curation. But that was never my own experience of the job. I was part administrator and part professional reader, responsible for learning our clients' tastes and constraints and making book recommendations based on this knowledge—rather than on any subjective, or even objective, measure of quality.

When people ask me what it was like to work in publishing, I pause, as if searching for the words (though in reality my reply is well-rehearsed), and then say: "I felt like a pig watching the sausage get made."

When this meets with a quizzical expression, as it usually does, I elaborate: "Reading so many books and seeing what would sell and what wouldn't made me cynical about writing. The stuff I liked most, the kind of stuff I was most interested in writing myself, often didn't do well." What I mean but usually don't say is that it made me feel like I could never succeed as a writer or that skimming a book before bed only so I can dismiss it in a droll 500-word email the next day made me feel like writing didn't matter—that the pursuit I had infused with meaning, joy, discovery,

deep intellect, beauty, truth, and everything good was actually just like everything else: a product.

I feel the same sadness when I go to bookstores now. I know being in a bookstore—so rare today in itself!—should fill me with hope but, instead, I am overwhelmed with despair, looking at all the new books with their shiny perfect covers, covers the author (who exists!) pinned their excitement to, and everything between those covers—all the time and energy that went into them—and now here the book finally is, in a bookstore, and barely anyone cares. And new ones being shipped out by the hundreds, all over the country, every day. Who will buy them? Who will understand?

Clearly labeled and biographical personal statement

(Written age 24, upon application to MFA programs)

Before I learned how to write, I can recall sitting at my father's antique desk, drawing lines of varying thicknesses in waves across the page. This was perhaps as close as I came to writing poetry for many years. I was raised to love novels above all other types of literature by a mother who named me for Jane Austen's *Emma*. Well into my adolescence, I read almost exclusively 19th-century British novels: *Middlemarch*, *Vanity Fair, Jane Eyre*. I was convinced I had been born into the wrong era. My skin was so pale it was practically translucent. In the heat, I grew light-headed and dizzy; in the cold, my extremities lost all natural color and feeling. Gruesome stories and long car rides nauseated me. Although we were not religious, I dreamt of taking my vows as a Catholic nun. In that life I would sweep the slate floor of my narrow cell with the cold beads of my rosary, tucked beneath my habit, pressed like a promise into my sun-snubbed flesh. Afterward I would speak to a gravel-voiced priest through soft wooden webbing: *Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned*. It was my version of a fairytale.

I now see how closely this original fantasy of solitude, hard work, devotion to the unknowable, and communion with a mystical Other hews to my current ambition of becoming a poet. It seems closer, even, than my separate childhood fantasy of writing fiction, a vocation that often demands more of an outward focus than poetry. But it took many years for me to shed this initial impulse toward fiction, to realize that poetry was the form my writing wanted to take.

At age 17 I read *Anna Karenina* and promptly jettisoned Anglophilia for Russophilia. Freshman year of college I woke up every weekday morning for my 9 a.m. intensive Russian class. That summer, and the two subsequent summers, I went to Russia for study and research. The primacy of poetry in Russian history and culture astonished me: Pushkin, not Washington, was their national hero; Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam were icons of resistance to Soviet power; everyone could quote Lermontov. I started reading the Russian poets, and then the American ones whose collected works I had not yet pulled from shelves at home—Hart Crane, T.S. Eliot, e.e. cummings. In autumn 2010, a class in 19th-century Russian poets taught me the intricacies of metrics. That spring I simultaneously decided to write my thesis about Elena Shvarts, a contemporary Russian poet, and began writing my own poems.

After a summer of writing, I applied for entrance into Lucie Brock-Broido's workshop. Lucie, who shared my incorrigible Romanticism, was an incredibly nurturing teacher to me as I continued to orient myself as a reader and writer of poetry. At some point during that semester I knew I had found my craft. Although I still enjoy writing in other genres, I see now what value in all literary forms is the poetic: the rhythm of a sentence, the precision of imagery, the compression of emotion.

Since the workshop with Lucie, my energies have often been pulled elsewhere but I have remained intellectually and personally focused on poetry: attending readings, reading new books, writing as much as I can. My experience at the Sewanee Writers Conference this summer was a revelation. While I had already decided to

pursue an MFA in poetry, I did not realize how much I missed belonging to a community of writers, nor did I remember to what degree workshops invigorated and inspired me. I now look forward to leading a life at Michigan similar to the one I envisioned as a child: cloistered in a sun-drenched room, books piled on my desk, pen and paper always at hand.

Three

Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?

Self-flagellation won't work

When I meet with my advisor to discuss my most recent workshop, during which we discussed an early version of this book, we talk through a few concerns: the lack of setting or simple sensory detail in many of these pieces; whether I need a clearer central theme or concern to connect them; the form of the personal statement—how can I rupture it even more?; and, finally, the problem of privilege.

"You have a few options," she said. "You could cut it out or downplay it. There are plenty of writers who probably have a similar background to you, but they don't talk about it.

"Or you could say, 'Fuck it; this is who I am,' though you have to be prepared to piss some people off.

"Or you could address it more directly than you're doing now. The problem is that you're somewhere in between—you're not ignoring it but you're also not coming right out and talking about it either.

"You don't want to apologize but you need to find a way to take control of the narrative. There's a long history, for instance, of captivity narratives around privilege—Edith Wharton and Henry James, the gilded cage, you know.

"Think of *Pretty Woman*, too. The rich man, Richard Gere, is 'released' by Julia Roberts—the lower class/down-to-earth/working girl—or however you want to characterize her.

"There are other possible narratives you could play around with here. The key word here is 'play.' Self-flagellation won't work."

I say I like the idea but that I've noticed when I try to address my own privilege directly—like in "A nice corn-fed Iowa girl" or "The fainting game"—that those essays themselves seem to be perceived as evidence of said privilege, as problematic, pretentious.

"Hm. Maybe it's a tone problem.

"What if you tried humor? What if you looked for the ridiculous in the situations? Made fun of yourself and your family more?

Much later, she asks me, "How would you *like* to be perceived?"

…

On a limb

> **Couple seeks egg donor, offering $100,000.** I'm a Harvard alum and my wife and I deeply value education. Egg donors with strong educational backgrounds are extremely hard to find, so **we are offering $100,000 to a donor age 20 to 27** with a Harvard degree. Bonus points if you're blonde! We would cover expenses including travel. No agencies please. For more info: eggdonorinfo1@gmail.com.

From: Emma Wood

To: eggdonorinfo1@gmail.com

SUBJ: Responding to your ad

Hi there,

I'm Emma, a blonde (!) '12 Harvard grad (summa cum laude/PBK) with an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. I saw your ad in Harvard magazine and thought I might email, even though I'm a bit older than you're looking for (bday: 11/26/1988).

I am healthy and athletic (currently training for my 3rd marathon) with no history of heart disease in my family. My paternal grandfather died of colon cancer at 69, and my maternal aunt died of leukemia, also in her 60s. I've never had anything but minor health issues, though I'm very nearsighted and did suffer a detached retina because of that a few years ago.

Here's a link to my website, if you want to learn more about me: http://emmawinsorwood.com/

I'm new to this and not quite sure what else to say… plus I know I'm out of your age range, so I'll leave it at that for now. Be in touch if you like!

From: eggdonorinfo1@gmail.com
To: Emma Wood
RE: Responding to your ad

Hi Emma,

Thank you so much for your response. I loved your email, and you would be the perfect candidate for us if you were a few years younger. Our doctor has strongly urged us to only consider candidates 25 and under, simply because IVF success rates are highest with younger donors. After experiencing the emotional rollercoaster of infertility, we want to do everything we can to have this succeed on the first try.

If it's OK with you, though, I'd like to bookmark your profile. There were a few things you said in your email that reminded me of myself, and that is so important (and hard to find) in this particular endeavor. I'm a writer, I was also PBK, and when I was younger I had dreams of applying to the Iowa Writer's Workshop (I know how competitive that program is, so congratulations on getting in, and completing it!). Your website was elegant and well done, you're a better runner than I am (why not upgrade!?) and I could go on and on. From the tiny glimpse you've given us, we think you are wonderful, and we wish you all the best things in life.

Thanks for going out on a limb and replying to our ad -- we really appreciated hearing from you.

Miriam (and Chris)

From: Emma Wood
To: eggdonorinfo1@gmail.com
RE: Responding to your ad

Hi Miriam, hi Chris,

Thanks for your reply! I don't know much about donation but figured the age limit was there for a fertility reason. I'm happy to be "bookmarked"--and I wish you the best of luck in finding a fabulous (maybe Harvard-educated) donor!

From: eggdonorinfo1@gmail.com
To: Emma Wood
SUBJ: reconnecting

Hi Emma,

I wanted to reconnect and ask if you would be willing to fill out this (admittedly lengthy) questionnaire. This will help us learn more about you and understand if you meet the health requirements for egg donation. The questionnaire should also give

you a sense of the process, and whether it's something you would be comfortable with.

Thanks so much!

From: Emma Wood
To: eggdonorinfo1@gmail.com
RE: reconnecting

Hi Miriam, hi Chris,

Nice to hear from you! I just completed the form (yes, I did it right away—I love forms like these, hah!). Thanks for continuing to consider me, and please be in touch if you need me to verify or elaborate on any information. I didn't want to engage with my parents too much at this point in the process, which is why I didn't reach out to them to confirm some of the grandparent info. But can certainly do so!

Warmly,
Emma

From: eggdonorinfo1@gmail.com
To: Emma Wood
RE: reconnecting

Hi Emma,

Thanks for following up! (And sorry for my slow reply -- we've been deep in thought and haven't opened the account in a few days.)

We really liked the information you provided, and if you're open to it, we'd love to have a short Skype conversation with you (no longer than 30 minutes, and we'll be sure to include enough time in that for you to ask questions, too). Would 9PM one day work? I think any day but Friday works for us. Send us your Skype number and we'll call you.

From: Emma Wood
To: eggdonorinfo1@gmail.com
RE: reconnecting

Hi Chris, hi Miriam,

Nice to hear from you! I'm about to head to LA to celebrate my husband's 30th birthday (a bunch of his friends are driving in from Vegas; LA was a kind of "halfway" point with a beach), so I'd love to chat but won't have time until next week. Pretty much any day next week would work, from this Sun - next Thurs. (And, yes, 9pm.) Let me know which day sounds best for you!

From: eggdonorinfo1@gmail.com
To: Emma Wood
RE: reconnecting

Hi Emma,

Have a great trip and celebration! Let's plan on Sunday at 9pm -- we'll ring you then. We're very casual, so if we get to Sunday and you're tired from your trip, just let us know and we can try Monday instead.

Looking forward to chatting!

From: eggdonorinfo1@gmail.com
To: Emma Wood
RE: reconnecting

Hi Emma,

We've made the truly wrenching decision to use a different egg donor. It breaks my heart to write that, because you were genuinely my first choice, and the person of everyone we considered that I felt I connected to best; in the end, we just felt captive to the age recommendation that our doctor gave us. Even as I write this, I feel sad -- there was no candidate with your combination of warmth and empathy and intellectual gifts and marathon-running athleticism and attractiveness. And you translate Russian plays with your husband, too! I hope you know that you are a remarkable human being -- we certainly saw that, and it pains me now to walk away.

Thank you so much for taking a risk and responding to our ad, and for taking the time to tell us about yourself. We are honored that you considered helping us with something so personal and important. As a small gesture of our gratitude, I'm sending an Amazon gift certificate to your email address under separate cover. (And if it's not too strange, I would love to still hire you to read my manuscript when I'm done with the next iteration!)

Thank you again, and we wish you the very best!
Miriam // Sarah Harvey

Tender part

I want a baby. I want to grow it inside of me and push it out of my tenderest parts, even if it rips them open. I want to give life to one of the many possible lives I have carried inside of me all of my life, the lives that first formed as I lay floating in my own mother's uterus. How weird, how incredible to think that, all this time I have been alive, I have been carrying the child I hope I will eventually have within me. Along with all the children I will never have.

I want a baby. But since I have just started taking prenatal vitamins, we must wait at least three months in order to minimize the chances of having a baby with spina bifida, a birth defect I had never heard of until I started wanting to have a baby—dreaming of having a baby, preparing to have a baby, even though I don't yet know if I can have a baby.

I want a baby. I fear I won't be able to have a baby, or that having a baby will be very difficult for me, that we will need fertility treatments like the ones my brother and his wife are undergoing now, and yet I don't believe these fears, I feel sure that it will be easy for us, which makes me even more nervous of how I'll react if it isn't.

I want a baby, but I know I will be miserable when I have one. I am terrible without sleep—grumpy, prone to histrionics and despair, easily overwhelmed—and I've never spent much time around babies, and I tend to worry too much when the littlest thing goes wrong and want to rush to the hospital, and I like to be prepared for everything, which is even more impossible in motherhood, and I like my alone time and my independence, and my relationship with my husband as it is, and I'm jealous,

and I don't want him to love the baby more than he loves me, and I am terrible with change.

But I want a baby. I want to know what our baby will look like, to see how my genes and my husband's genes interact, what kind of person they will form. I want to see some of myself in my baby, but I want the baby to take after my husband because I think he is an exceptional person, and that I am rather ordinary.

I want a baby to snuggle with, to kiss, to bathe. A baby for our dogs to lick and love on and protect, a baby who will love our dogs as we love them, which will be—unimaginably—less than we love our baby. I want our dogs to "have" a baby, though I worry about how they will act around the baby, if they will be gentle enough, careful enough, if we will be able to instill in them a proper sense of boundaries. I know already they will, once the baby starts eating, love the baby for all the food the baby will inevitably throw or drop to the ground, and which I will never—so long as we have dogs, which will be forever—have to clean up.

I want a baby even though it feels uncool to want a baby—not environmentally thoughtful, not financially responsible, not feminist, not young, not unconventional, selfish.

I want a baby even though I am someone who thinks she always needs to be in control. I want to be forced to abdicate control.

I want a baby because I think having one will make me a better person.

I want a baby even though I know that I probably only want one because I am an animal, programmed to reproduce and because a lot of the women I know in the

small town where I live already have babies—multiple babies—and I want to be a part of the club. The mom club. I want a baby so I can complain about that baby with them.

I want a baby and I don't want to adopt unless I have to. I want to have a "natural" birth, I will be miserable if I have to have a C-section, I want to know—finally—to feel, to my fullest capacity, "that dark involvement with blood and birth and death" (Joan Didion). Every month since I was eleven, I have witnessed the death of another possible life. I want to give life. Just one life.

Long, clunky, and hard-to-say

For a while, one of the main sources of conflict in my marriage was our surname.

He didn't mind if I did or didn't change my name, while I hoped to persuade him to change his. He didn't want to change his name because he didn't see why men should have to give up their names just because women had been doing it for centuries; either way, one family was being lost, and anyway, he loved his name and his family.

I tried to wheedle and guilt him into changing his. I loved the idea of giving him my name—the thought of bucking tradition excited me nearly as much as the thought that doing so would mean I possessed *him* instead of the other way around.

But no. He wouldn't budge on his name.

The problem wasn't so much now as later—what name would we give our kids?

For a while, we considered picking a new last name that would become our family name, and so our child's last name whenever we eventually had one. By sacrificing both of our names, we reasoned, we could all share a name, without either of us caving to the other—without either of us possessing. We threw around ideas: the road we live on (Atherley), my mom's maiden name (Sandberg), a random noun or adverb (like Branch or Ever). Nothing felt quite right, and the whole concept never really did either.

I was reminded of how I got a tattoo at 17—not so much because I wanted a tattoo but because I was not the kind of girl who seemed like she would get a tattoo. In other words, I wanted a tattoo because I wanted to see others' reactions to my having gotten one. Because, when someone accused me of being too strait-laced or square, I wanted something to point to, some tangible proof, that I was otherwise. I got the tattoo removed in my twenties. Wanting to pick a new last name was like that—something I wanted to do for the appearance of it, rather than for the thing itself.

Finally, what we decided to do was this: each keep our last name and give our daughter both our names, hyphenated (according to a friend, this is what they do in Canada). I will still be Emma Winsor Wood; he will still be C— Bassett, and our daughter will be So-and-so Bassett-Wood. This way, everybody would win.

Even though it was my idea, I didn't love it. My mom hates hyphenated names, so I had grown up with an ingrained bias against them. And, more importantly, I am a poet, the sound of words is important to me, and I didn't think our names sounded good together: Bassett-Wood. A lumbering, spotted hound with drooping eyes and long ears combined with the hard, fibrous material that makes up the trunk of a tree, a dense log that clunks when you drop it to the ground. It felt lugubrious to me. By which I don't mean that it felt sad, but that it actually *felt like* the word lugubrious: long and clunky and hard-to-say. And, I thought, it could just be Wood—so light, so short, so easy to spell!

But we had agreed on Bassett-Wood—it was fair, it was equal, and some of my friends even said they liked it—and so I worked hard to get used to it.

The polished, witty surface

My husband recently threw down *Early Work*, a contemporary debut novel, saying it represented everything he hated about fiction: too clever, too bougie, too coolly ironic. Curious, I picked the book up and found I loved it for the same reasons.

There was a mercilessness to the narrator's gaze that manifested in Andrew Martin's descriptions and that felt—maybe not *realistic* (the observations were too sharply insightful to have arisen out of the moment)—but essentially true, in that they were both accurate to my own experiences, and honest, in that they captured the duplicity and hypocrisy inherent in most of our actions, and especially in bourgeois society. To me, the gaze was what is often described, in reviews and blurbs, as "unflinching."

At the same time, I could agree, there was something essentially artificial about the writing. The insights were sharp, smart, incisive, witty—the literary equivalent of one-liners—which meant the thought process behind them was invisible to me, the reader; I didn't see the mine, just the perfect, polished diamond. Although a "less is more" approach is often seen as desirable in fiction, and in writing in general, these kinds of pithy statements can make the narrator, and the characters, appear closed off, solidified rather than solidifying. To me, the book had an Austen-ish feel, but, in Austen, there was more doubt and ambiguity—every word had a duplicity; in Martin's book, the duplicity wasn't always clear. *Was he just being an asshole?*

This kind of wit and cleverness is an essentially bougie mode, in that banter, quickness, and lightness—rather than authenticity, sentiment, and slowness—are what the bourgeois tend to value most. For the bourgeois, the quip is the ultimate; the long speech or sentimental declaration, an embarrassment. Franco Moretti, an Italian literary scholar, has said, "The bourgeois novel is the greatest enemy of truth and honesty that was ever invented."

I grew up in a bourgeois household. My family was bourgeois in the original, Medieval sense (they lived in a city) and in the Marxist sense (my dad's family had owned a steel factory—i.e. the "means of production"—during industrialization) and in the colloquial sense (we lived comfortably; had a sitting room with a piano; my parents were rational, proper; my mother named me after Emma Woodhouse from Jane Austen's *Emma*). And even as a child, I was known in my family for my sarcasm and biting one-liners. During my MFA, where I started writing poems seriously, the works were clever, quick, light—a reflection of what I had learned to value and to cultivate in my social interactions.

At first, I was happy being clever. I felt my early work, a series of sonnets about early sexual experiences, represented my true, authentic voice. In reality, those poems spoke not in my internal voice, but in the voice I presented to the world, the voice I performed. Of course, I didn't see that. What I saw were poems that were funny and smart, that announced their technical mastery while displaying education and wit—in other words, poems that affirmed the bourgeois values I had grown up with.

As I was writing them, I understood them as transgressive because they were about sex—still a taboo in the culture in which I'd been raised. I didn't see how conveying these usually messy, uncomfortable sexual experiences in tidy, tongue-in-cheek poems with firm, clear endings could have the reverse effect—that it might tame, rather than complicate, them.

A tame poem, like a tame animal, is fit for display. It can be viewed, maybe even interacted with, but we know it will not hurt us. These are the kinds of poems—accessible, acceptable—

that appear in mainstream literary publications like *The New Yorker*. Now, in my own writing, I am wary of this same cleverness, eager to poke holes in it to find the shape of what is hiding beneath.

And what of the contemporary debut novel? *Early Work*? The rupture never happened. The book never rose above the clever. In the end, I didn't like it either.

Appendix:

blowjob sonnet

Toutes les dames boivent gratuitement read the sign on the door,
so I, sixteen, not yet a whomever,
or an unopened letter in a broken dresser,
did & so more
of the more of the sad
same story:
he was tall, blond, white as an allegory,
a catch that had
caught me, which makes me
    (a) a bleak, (b) a ball, (c) contagious, or
    (d) the lure—
Please discuss, along w/ the effect of the sea
slamming the shore hoarse
& her pink knees pebbled red from the force.

What the writer sees

When my advisor read an early version of this manuscript, she told me, “In nonfiction, the narrator needs to see what the writer sees.”

She went on to talk about my blind spots—how sometimes I say one thing while the reader clearly sees another. (I’d give you an example, but I can’t find one.)

Is that true? I wondered, thinking over her words later at home. *And how is that even possible?*

I pictured an owl swiveling its head. 270 degrees. Even an owl can’t go a full 360—how could I?

Of course I can’t see everything the reader sees. There are certain parts of my body I can’t see without the aid of a mirror. So it is with the interior.

On a 14-hour drive from Santa Cruz to Salt Lake City, my husband and I were listening to Rachel Cusk’s novel, *Kudos*. In it, a nearly-invisible narrator listens to near-strangers tell stories of their lives. The narrator is incredibly intelligent and analytic, the kind of woman people might call “cold,” and she can see, in everyone she talks to, the ways in which they delude themselves. In many ways, this novel, and the two that precede it in the trilogy, are all about this: self-delusion.

I told my husband that these books scared me for this reason. They made everyone look sad and small, going through life thinking it is one way when in fact, to an outsider observer, it is so clearly another.

He said that he felt the same way at first—that Cusk’s trilogy presented a pessimistic view of life—but that he had, more recently, begun to see it as a

humanizing project, as in: This is not sad or small; this is simply what it means to be human. To be jealous, self-deluded, selfish, ungrateful, status-conscious. To love your dog perhaps more than your child. To miss your husband only to realize, when you called him, that it was not really him you missed. To covet your sister's boyfriend.

What depressed me was that the person who was living the experience could never see what was happening to her as she was living it. It was only in retrospect that anything became clear, but then "in retrospect" meant it had become memory, and so how much of it was fiction at that point, a story created to explain the self to the self?

And then, too, in Cusk's novels, the characters were uncannily perceptive. They were able to see more, in retrospect, than most can—or are willing—to see.

Did my advisor mean I could only write about things in retrospect? That is a general rule of memoir: don't write about anything too recent. But that dictum, while sensible, doesn't quite make sense because our relationship to the past is constantly changing as we change. No single person could ever have a 360-degree view, or even 270 one. Self-delusion is necessary, to live and to write.

One of my great frustrations when writing nonfiction, rather than poetry, is that this self-delusion must appear to be nonexistent. Another is that the average reader sees the narrator as *you*—the actual, authentic, real you. That is, after all, what distinguishes nonfiction from fiction: the reality of it all. The fact that I am speaking to you directly, not from behind the scrim of imagination, but as if face to face. As a result of this, the average reader (myself included) obsesses about the truth: they want to catch you in a lie or a contradiction, or psychologize you, or find cracks in the

narrative you've spun out of your life, or they simply want to know more—to see pictures of you and the characters you've created. This is, at least, much of what I experience when I read nonfiction or even autobiographical fiction.

I see others doing it too. My advisor, for instance, always fixates on my relationship with my husband. "You never talk about the husband directly," she says. "And, the word 'husband' comes up so many times! Maybe you should write about that?" Or "I sense some tension in this scene with the husband. Did anyone else feel that? Perhaps that is something to explore."

No, I explain.

"I can't tell a lie, Pa! … I did cut it with my hatchet"

Ever since I was a child, I have been described as honest, direct, blunt—by friends and in my report card write-ups. I interrupted my classmates—or sometimes even the teacher—to correct them, I could (not unwittingly, but unintentionally) insult classmates with my unvarnished opinions, my "attitude" wasn't great.

I grew up in the era of the online personality quiz. I *knew* I could be blunt, but I liked being that way. I valued hearing the truth, so I assumed everyone did, and in all situations. In my family, I was known for pointing out new blemishes and wrinkles on my parents' young faces; I would fix my gaze on it, fascinated. Then: "What is *that*?" I'd say, poking a pimple, or announcing it ("You have a pimple!"), even if there were guests over.

It never occurred to me that this could be embarrassing for my parents; after all, everyone could look at their face and see it for themselves. I was aware, however, that my parents didn't like this habit, and I defended it by saying maybe I'd become a dermatologist. I didn't point these things out because it gave me pleasure, I'd claim (although it did), but because I was genuinely interested in the skin. And I *was* interested in skin—but I also craved the reaction I got when I publicly pointed something out—the laughter, the simultaneous exclamations of embarrassment, amusement, and surprise, the way everyone looked at me as if they were only just seeing me.

For some people, growing up means learning to tell the truth; for me, it meant learning to lie. First, for the sake of politeness ("you look great" and "yes, I love

eggplant"), then to save face ("I woke up with a fever" instead of "I slept through class") and to gain it (by trumping up my accomplishments and experience when applying for jobs), lies to hide things from others and also, sometimes, from myself.

I have always been bad at keeping secrets, because, most of the time, I don't understand why it should be a secret—most of the stories or facts that my friends ask me to hold secret are either too trivial to matter much to anyone or else they reveal a weakness that will usually only endear that person more to others. Why keep such a thing to myself?

My honesty makes me a good writer (I'm not worried about revealing other people's secrets or my own) but a limited one (it's difficult for me to leave my own voice and autobiography).

I am married to a liar. I have learned to lie, but I will only do the bare minimum of lying I need to do to get by, whereas my husband will lie more than necessary to keep others calm and happy. Sometimes, his lies are ones of agreement or laziness—"to keep the conversation going," as he likes to say. More often, his are lies of omission, designed to keep me (or his mom or his dad) from worrying. And yet—to be honest—his facility with lying scares me: if one day he told me he had a secret family, I wouldn't be at all surprised

However, his lies are usually for others—with others' interests in mind—while my obsession with accuracy and the truth tends to be selfish. I have an irrepressible urge to divulge everything I'm thinking and feeling, even when I know doing so will harm another.

Sometimes I think this is why I am a writer—not because I love words, but because I long to share my secrets. Secretly, I love the spotlight but hate to hog it and so I speak as fast as possible to get through whatever I have to say in the least possible amount of time. On the page, however, I can say whatever I want, at length, if I like (usually, I still prefer to keep it short). And, best of all, whenever I start to annoy or bore you, you can shut the book or your computer; you can shut me up.

Bad historian

Whenever I said I wasn't feeling well, even if I didn't have a fever and looked the same as I had the previous morning, when I'd been reluctant to wake up but still been perfectly healthy, my mother would knit her brow in concern, coo "poor Emma," and practically order me to stay home.

I loved staying home. Sometimes, I wasn't really sick—not well, exactly, but not sick either—and I would spend all day happily sitting on the sofa reading in my pajamas until my mom got home, and then I would get to perform being slightly sick again and bask in her heightened sympathy and attention.

Growing up, the fever was the holy grail of sickness. It was empirical proof that you were a reliable historian, and that you definitely needed to stay home. I remember once, when my mom left the room after having stuck a mercury thermometer in my mouth, taking it out and pressing it to the hot lightbulb next to my bed. It didn't work; when she came back, I still didn't have a fever (she let me stay home anyway). Even now, I don't really feel I can claim sickness unless I have a fever.

I have a theory that people who really hate being sick are the best at taking care of the sick. Everyone hates to be sick—it's inconvenient, it's uncomfortable, it forces you to miss out on social events, and it can be boring, especially for children. That's not what I mean. I mean people who are really, really uncomfortable when they are sick, who are *not good* at being sick. I am not good at being sick, and neither is my mom. I moan and groan and imagine the worst possible outcome: my headache

is not from the flu but meningitis or a large-but-benign brain tumor. This makes me a terrible sick person—inconsolable except when I'm sleeping—but a wonderful caretaker, able to anticipate needs based on what I myself would want if I were in the same position.

My husband is too good at being sick; unlike me, he is used to pushing through pain. What's good about this is that he's low maintenance and frequently able to "suck it up" and get back on his feet quickly; what's bad is that he doesn't seem aware of all of his symptoms and this makes him an unreliable narrator, downplaying and omitting significant details from the story he relays to the doctor.

When I went to the ER last weekend, the doctor asked, after I recounted the story of my illness with such surety and in such detail, if I was a PhD in the medical field. When I corrected him, he said that literature made sense, too. It was rare to see such an "excellent historian," as he put it. That I might have fictionalized the story never seemed to occur to him.

Being sick throws you violently back into your body while also simultaneously cutting you off from it. In the 21st century, it can feel almost prehistoric to be reduced to a headache, abdominal pain, night sweats, to an animal who can barely think, who simply breathes and sleeps and grunts in pain. I am my body and yet the world my body normally inhabits is severely circumscribed, tiny. While well, I might have thought nothing of running 20 miles alone on a hot day; when sick, simply walking downstairs for a glass of water begins to seem like a

difficult, dangerous task. As I recover, I must learn again how it feels to be well, test out my own limits, understand all over again what I am capable of.

The kind of rich people want to read about

I like my advisor's idea—of playing up, even satirizing, my privilege—but I'm not sure it will work. The problem is people tend to think—because of certain biographical details (New York City, Andover, gap year, Harvard) and inherited possessions (like my grandmother's needlepoint loafers and opal ring)—I grew up richer than I did.

But I did not grow up the kind of rich people want to read about: I had a normal, happy childhood. My parents weren't mean alcoholics, they didn't hold extravagant parties with gilded turtles, they didn't deprive my brother and me of certain luxuries to build character, nor did they, as I always wished, own an old estate filled with wolfhounds.

People like to read about that kind of rich—the zany kind—because it reminds them the rich don't actually have it better than they do, that they might actually have it worse.

My dad's parents might have been that kind of rich, and his grandparents definitely were—his zany grandfather sometimes skated to work when the river froze over and famously drove his convertible around with the top down even in the dead of the Pennsylvania winter.

But my parents? My parents are normal people, who also happen to be wealthy.

When I was a kid, they seemed achingly normal—and, in fact, compared to many of my peers from my private New York City girls' school, even solidly middle

class. My mom didn't spend her days shopping for me; she worked full time. My dad worked at a law firm, but he wasn't a partner. We lived in an apartment on Central Park South but in a back unit, with a view onto the airshaft, that lacked central air: in the summer, my brother and I would shut ourselves into my parents' bedroom, the only room in the apartment with an AC window unit. My parents could afford to rent a house in Connecticut for a few weeks in the summer, and when they could eventually afford to buy a house there, it was unassuming, painted barn-red with black shutters, no ocean view. I had classmates whose parents owned a mansion in the Hamptons and one in Florida too.

I didn't understand that simply to own an apartment in Manhattan, to go to private school, to summer anywhere, was to be wealthy. I didn't see what my parents could afford; I saw only what they couldn't.

“Nobody thought about that”

My mom loves to read about the rich—not the new rich, Trump-Tower rich, but the old zany rich, English-castle rich. The kind of rich who might not even be so rich anymore, who have to open their castles to the public to afford to continue living in them. Which is to say aristocratic rich, which is to say not rich but elite—historically elite. Which is to say it’s not so much the money or the lifestyle it implies that interests her but the history and those old houses (she loves old houses) and the antiques and heirlooms that fill them.

My mom was always fascinated with, and proud of, my dad’s family history, from the Wood side because they had belonged to this historical elite. Technically, my father is of royal descent—he can trace his ancestry back to King Henry III of England on both sides; his grandparents were cousins—and his father owned a named estate in Conshohocken, Pa. (“Camp Discharge”), replete with two swimming pools, a gentleman’s farm (orchards, some sheep), and servants: a caretaker, a nanny, a cook. Camp Discharge burned down in the 1960s, which only added to its romance: it could forever remain an idea (an imagined thing being always more fantastic than the thing itself).

My dad himself barely got to live at Camp Discharge but his childhood was still glamorous; it was of the kind my mom would like to read about. My dad lived in France for a time, attending a Jesuit boarding school near Paris while his parents got divorced, and then his father, a writer and an old-school bohemian, set up house with his new French-American wife in Paris, and my dad spent part of his summers there

or at their house on the Greek island of Spetses which was constantly filled with artists, writers, and intellectuals, and the other part of the summer learning to sail off the coast of Maine where his mother had rented a house, and the rest of the year with his mother and siblings in New York City. My dad's father worked on the script for *Barbarella*, a campy movie starring Jane Fonda; as a teen, my dad was invited out to the set. His mother wouldn't let him go.

I know my dad is grateful for his childhood, but I don't know if it was happy. The divorce was hard on him and his siblings, especially since their father's new wife had four children of her own, and these children got to live with their father, who quickly became a real father to these other boys. If my dad's childhood was happy, it was because my dad is a generally untroubled, contented person: he tends to enjoy all his experiences. I cannot tell if this is because he's not reflective enough (a flaw) or because he looks for the positive rather than the negatives in life (an attribute). Probably it is somewhere in between.

My mom, by contrast, is always talking about how happy her childhood was—so much so that this has become a joke in our family: my mother's very, very happy childhood with her very, very, very nice parents and very, very nice neighbors in her very, very nice Chicago suburb.

When I asked her about her childhood recently, she talked about having sleepovers at her grandmother's house, where she'd build forts from turned-over tables and blankets then watch the Lawrence Welk show. "It was very Midwestern," she said self-consciously, laughing. "Nothing Daddy would ever do." And later:

“None of this sounds very interesting to me. Not like Daddy’s life—swanning around Europe, skiing in Switzerland.”

The implication being that the price of that happiness was glamor.

Or: “All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” (Tolstoy).

Because so much was made of my father’s glamorous childhood and family history when I was growing up, I always assumed it meant my mother came from humbler roots. But she didn’t: they were wealthy—just not elite, not old money, not glamorous or zany.

When I asked my mother if she felt rich growing up, she said:

> No. But nobody thought about that. We were very comfortable. We went on nice vacations. We lived in the nicest suburb of Chicago. But there were a lot of wealthy people in Kenilworth. There were people who had cooks and much bigger houses than we had. You just didn’t really... Nobody thought about that.
>
> The only person that we—well, I guess, Bill Lacy, because he lived in a big house on the lake that had an indoor swimming pool and a guest house, and Sam Train who also had an indoor swimming pool, but we didn’t know that his father invented DayGlo paint and was a multimillionaire.

Four

Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?

That old cliché

It's amazing how there are certain sayings you hear again and again throughout your life and yet still can't *grasp*—even if you understand them—until the world forces you to. Turning 30 forced me to grasp that old cliché: youth is wasted on the young.

"Youth is wasted on the young" is something you can understand but not grasp until you're no longer young—though everyone ages out of young at their own pace. On the one hand, I feel lucky that I could be young for so long. On the other hand, I wish that I knew what I know now when I was younger.

What I know now is no revelation. What I know is that, in my youth, I cared too much about the things I shouldn't have cared about (grades, extracurriculars, being cool, getting into college, being perceived as smart/competent/pretty, etc) and not enough about the things I should have cared about (friends, family, being kind, trying new things at the risk of failing, doing what gives me pleasure, etc).

Turning 30 forced me to confront my own mortality in a sustained way for the first time. I had seen it before but only in glimpses: for instance, when our car skid out on an icy road as a truck barreled toward us.

But, to be 30 is to be, at best, a third of the way through your life. To be 30 is to see the arc of your life and to realize you're approaching its peak. One day, I now understand, even while I'm still alive, there will be things I cannot do in the body I will then inhabit. There will be things it will be too late to learn. Now I am 30, I am trying to do more of what makes me feel alive and less of everything else.

For me, this mostly means more physical activities. I am learning to surf. Surfing, even badly, makes me feel alive—like I am *in* the world, not separate from it, protected and watching. And I recently started horseback riding—a favorite pastime of my 'youth'—again, too. I don't have any goals as a rider or as a surfer; I'm happy making incremental progress toward a mastery I'm fairly confident I'll never achieve. While I'm on a wave or in the saddle, I don't have the capacity to think about anything but what I am doing in the moment it is happening—in part because I lack mastery. Nothing is second nature; it is all *primus,* primal.

Sometimes, usually after I surf, I contemplate dropping out of the life I've so carefully, anxiously constructed—leaving the PhD program in which I'm enrolled, moving with my husband and my dogs into a tiny home, and running double-digits every day. It's a strange fantasy because our life allows us the time to do most of the things we want to do—to run, ride, surf, write, travel, be with our dogs. But though being a PhD student enables me to lead, more or less, the lifestyle I'd like, it means I am first of all a student-academic, an intellectual; to 'drop out' would mean to become, first of all, an athlete. A student of the body, rather than of the book.

When I was young, I hated sports; it was part of the bookish persona I cultivated. Now I wish I had played them.

"Don't be afraid," my husband often tells me, half-jokingly, when I tell him why I don't want to do ABC, when I hesitate to pursue XYZ. I am trying not to be afraid. I am trying.

The pain of understanding

I got a haircut last week. I had been growing out my hair, and it had finally reached the point where it could be classified as *long*. But I needed a trim. It had been six months. My ends were fried, my hair was always getting tangled. So, I went in. I told her "Just a trim, to get the ends" and "I'm growing my layers out." She nodded and smiled as if she had heard me and then cut two—two and a half?—inches off in sets of choppy layers. I smiled and gave her a 20% tip, and then went home and threw my phone across the room and raged to my husband: I look like my mom! I *told* her I was growing my layers out! *All I wanted* was to have long hair before I died! Now I would have to wait *six months* (minimum!) for my hair to be as long as it had been twelve hours ago!

I hadn't been this upset about a haircut since high school. Then, this kind of tantrum had been a frequent occurrence. I hated to get my hair cut, and yet I always imagined the next time would be different, that, in the end, my hair would look exactly as I pictured it, and I would be transformed from prettyish to straight-up hot, like the mousey girls in teen movies. This never occurred. I always looked the same, but worse, because I had just gotten a new haircut, and, as a rule, I hated anything new unless it was from a store. Every time it was the same: I couldn't bear to look at myself in a mirror, I had never been so miserable in my whole life, I would never get my hair cut again! Still, a few months later, I'd be back in the swivel chair, full of optimism for the new life that would finally begin, with my perfect hair.

Okay, so, yes, this kind of depression and rage over a haircut had once been a staple of my life, but, during my twenties, I had learned to take haircuts in stride, in part because I stopped believing in radical transformation and so stopped asking for radical changes: "just the ends" and "keep the angle." I knew what I liked, what I could live with. I thought I had transcended this childish cycle.

So, it was confusing when, last week, I got home, looked at myself in the mirror, and started to cry. I tried to laugh it off with my husband who said, "Your hair will grow" and "I can barely see the difference" and—finally—"You're being ridiculous," but it didn't help, and soon he was laughing at me. What was wrong with me? Why did I care so much?

I texted my friends on our group thread, and they said they understood, it had to do with feeling pretty—as in, without long hair, I didn't feel pretty. Maybe that was true for them, but not for me. I'd had short to medium hair for most of my life. "Long," for me, had always meant well above my nipples. As a child, my mom never let me grow it out, and her words—that my hair was "too thin" to grow out, that it would look "flat"—had stuck with me. I kept it short. And I had felt pretty, on and off, throughout. No, for me, it wasn't about beauty—or, okay, it was not *primarily* about beauty (what wasn't at least a bit about beauty?).

Being forced to realize it wasn't about beauty, however, helped me to realize what it was about. Three months earlier, I had turned thirty. Having longer hair—hair that I imagined would be, in a few months, actually *long*—made me look and feel

younger. Of course, it was about aging. Since I had turned thirty, it seemed like it was all about aging.

And the haircut was terrible not only because it made me look older (like the mom I was hoping to soon become but never wanted to look like), but because I was aware that the window in which I could have long hair had narrowed and would soon be shut. Eventually, age *would* render my hair too thin, and with longer hair, I'd look pathetic, an older woman trying to look young.

Still, knowing this, I felt better. Most of the pain is not understanding the pain.

Warm and beautiful and glorious

The first time I built a fire by myself, it was winter, I had just turned 18, and I was living alone on a horse farm just south of Paris. The stable hand, Roger [Roh-jhay], a gray-haired man with a Super-Mario-style mustache who spoke French with an accent I could barely understand, and the horses' caretaker, Audrey [Aw-dray], a young woman with a cloud of wavy brown hair and a friendly, open face, lived on the property, too, but in their own units. I was alone in the main house. Nights, I rarely saw them. Audrey had a boyfriend, friends, her own life. Roger… was a drunk, I think. At least we joked about it. We were not very nice to Roger.

So, Roger and Audrey existed, they were close by, I was not entirely alone, but it felt that way. I'd grown up in an apartment across from Central Park in New York. I romanticized the country but had never lived in it. Now there I was. The nights were empty and cold. And, after a certain point (one can only read for so long), there was nothing to do. And the mouth of the enormous stone fireplace (in memory, it was at least as tall as I am—five feet) gaped at me from the sofa. So I decided I would start to make fires. How hard could it be?

The next day, come evening, I gathered brush. Something must have recently been cleared or trimmed because there were loads of thorny bushels of fine twigs—the perfect kindling—bundled near where the firewood was stacked, in the small, fenced yard that abutted the house. I don't remember how many times I tried and failed to start that fire but I know it must have been difficult—or at least not effortless—because, when it really caught, I felt as if I had really accomplished

something. And I had. I had built a fire. Man may have been doing it for centuries, but I had never done it before. It was warm and beautiful and glorious. I celebrated with a glass of the white wine I was slowly siphoning from the family who owned the farm and the house, my hosts, and by rereading an email from the boy who was very slowly breaking my heart. After that, I made a fire nearly every night.

These fires have since gained a kind of mythical status in my own personal history; none have measured up, either in size or in the triumph I felt upon succeeding. I used to brag about making those fires.

Now, I live in the mountains. It's the kind of rural where you can barely see your neighbors' houses and have to drive in order to go anywhere but the woods. We have two fireplaces. They are not huge, they are not open-mouthed; they are utilitarian, meant to maximize the output of heat. And, in the winter, we make fires almost every day. If you are sitting in a house, even 55 degrees feels cold.

The first year we moved here, we waited too long to buy wood, and when we finally did, it wouldn't burn. I wasted hours trying to make it light, long sessions that would leave my fingers smelling like burn, my eyes smarting, my throat scratching from the smoke. We thought we didn't know how to make fires. We watched YouTube videos, read instructions, bought fire starter and lighter fluid. Finally, our landlord tried to burn a piece and told us: "It's wet. It won't burn." But we had paid for it and couldn't afford to buy more, so we kept trying, dousing it in fluid and surrounding it with cardboard until we forced it to burn, and it did, popping and hissing and blackening the fireplace doors. That winter, I often spoke of the fires I

had made in France. “I know how to do this,” I said. “I’ve made fires before. Did I ever tell you…”

Now, our third year in this home, we know better. When we buy wood, we knock it to make it sure it sounds hollow, and we light it with the help of cardboard scavenged from the discarded Amazon boxes we stockpile throughout the year. The fires burn hot and long and clean. Without them, the house feels cold and empty and sad. Like the tin man before he got a heart.

Long, dark stretches

Rembrandt's fame used to mystify me. The figures in his paintings seemed to barely emerge from the murk. Now, after three winters living in the mountains, where, with every big storm, it is not a question of "if" the power will go out but "when," I understand: he painted what he saw.

In college, a friend told me that, when she was sad, she would turn out all the lights and burn candles, so I began to do the same. I was often sad then; I cultivated it because it seemed interesting, writerly. The candles didn't exactly cheer me up, but they were beautiful and gentle, and they made me feel as if I were the bringing my physical state closer to my emotional one. Once my roommate came home during this ritual, and I was embarrassed, as if I'd been caught looking through her closet, as I sometimes did while she was gone.

As a teenager, my husband's father served a Mormon mission in Ecuador and lived, for few weeks, in a town without electricity. After a while, my husband said, he came to dread the evenings—those long dark stretches.

Sundays growing up, we ate by candlelight. The candlesticks we used most weeks were wooden, and they spiraled up, in a barley twist. My favorites were the ones we reserved for special occasions: the hammered-brass angels with delicate detailing and the chandelier-like ones with a wide glass collar from the lip of which dangled six long glass prisms. When we weren't using them, we kept the candlesticks on top of a bureau, in a hallway next to the kitchen.

At my grandparents' house in Long Island, the candlesticks lived on the table all week. And they were glorious objects: sterling silver candelabras molded into trees, with small animals—a stag, a doe, a squirrel—clustering around the trunks. I miss those candlesticks; they went with an aunt or uncle when my grandparents died.

My mother accumulates candlesticks. She picks them up at every antique store or junk shop she enters. When she throws parties, she gathers them and lights them all, filling the house with their soft glow.

She hates overhead lights. I inherited this hatred, and, at first, my husband hated this in me: "We're living in the dark," he'd say.

In reply, I'd switch on all the lamps in our room and say, "Doesn't that look so much better? Don't you feel better?"

When we first got married, I tried to eat dinner by candlelight every night, but he objected, found it…what? pretentious? overly formal? simply too dark? I don't know. Eventually, I only lit the candles at dinner parties and during power outages.

During the winter, the power goes out frequently where we live; if you drove on the roads here—tree-lined, narrow—you would see why. The moment we lose power is always something of a relief. I gather all our candlesticks—even the hated crystal ones, which we haven't managed to sell yet—and light them, and we sit together in the light.

Nothing to say

One of my teachers reads the first 40 pages of this manuscript and tells me she wants to read more about "what happened at Iowa." I think about this. What did happen at Iowa?

I became a poet. I got married, got dogs, created the life I have now.

After that, I draw a blank.

My husband and I both wake up in the night and can't fall back asleep. We go downstairs for a snack. I'm 18 weeks pregnant. I vomit in the kitchen sink then eat a piece of peanut butter toast and tell him about my teacher wanting to hear about Iowa.

I say that there is the distant past, like my childhood, which I always feel compelled to write about, and then there is the present, which also compels me, and then there is a kind of "middle past"—not-so-distant but definitely no longer present—that doesn't compel me. Maybe, I say, it's that I haven't quite digested it enough, or something. That I'm not yet sure what to take away from the experience.

"Or maybe there's just nothing to say," he says.

"Maybe," I say, "but I don't really believe there is ever 'nothing' to say. And a lot happened there: I became a poet. We got married, got the dogs. I created the life I have now."

Sitting here now, I can think of a few more: I began teaching, began translating, began running marathons.

The problem, I think, is not that there's nothing to say but that I've already said it—that is, I've written about it in a novella-length memoir that captures how I felt half the time I was there: depressed, lonely, friendless except for my husband. The other half of the time, I was brilliant, happy, drunk. Both experiences were necessary, I think. I left Iowa an artist.

To write about a specific time and place is to replace the memories you carry with you—inchoate, mostly untapped but still there, waiting—with something hard, lacquered, definite. Writing about a moment is like taking a picture of it: the picture eventually becomes all you have left. Everything outside of the frame is lost.

Watch for dogs

They’re dirty, they smell, they track in mud, sticks, and leaves. They howl, they growl. They lick their asshole then you, they hump their toys, they jump on the old, they nip the young. They vomit on the carpet, they piss on the rug, they drool. They roll in dead animals then sleep under the covers. Like us, they dream and, in their dreams, they sometimes kick, scratch, growl, or bark, and never once apologize for having woken you up. They steal your spot in the middle of the night when you get up to pee. They sniff crotches and mouths and other animals’ shit, they pant too loudly, they want to go out as soon as you sit down to read. One always needs the toy the other one has. They scratch your arms and your wood stairs, they shit all over the yard, their water bowl needs to be filled again, they need an ice cube every time you open the freezer and a treat every time you leave the house. They eat without chewing, they drink then drip water all over the floor, they shed all over your bedding, your furniture, your favorite clothes. They don’t get off the bed when you and your husband have sex. They pull on the leash or else stop and sniff everything, they bark at your neighbors, they chew up the most expensive toys you buy, you are always buying them new toys. They’re always home, you’re never really alone, and they always have to be near you, on you or against you, and yet only on their own terms—when you want to cuddle, they choose to curl up alone at the end of the bed, and if you shut the door on them, they whine, yelp, scratch. They’re obsessed with food; one of these days you’ll break a leg tripping over one in the kitchen, but they look so terribly sad when they beg it saps all your resolve to finally stop slipping them treats and so you do, and so you can’t really blame

them if they beg, can you? They hate to go outside in the rain and will hold it all day when the weather's bad, but when it's nice, they want to be outside all day, in the sun on the deck, where you worry about them wandering away and getting hit by one of your roommates driving home, even though you have a WATCH FOR DOGS sign at the top of your driveway, even though you sent a special email about dog safety when they moved in. When they're hurt or sick, it's painful to watch them struggle, and when you help, they think you're hurting them more. You worry about the quality of the kibble you feed them, the bones you give them, the amount of exercise they get, their happiness, their social life, and how much they weigh; you worry about them as you would over a child, like I imagine I will, one day, over a child, but they're not children, they're dogs, just dogs, a friend tells you, and if she weren't such an old friend, you might hate her for that.

Other people’s dogs

I too dislike them.

Habit

It is, according to Emerson, the "hobgoblin of small minds." Well, then, I am small-minded because I am a creature of it. Here is where, if I had one, I would detail my daily routine:

6:00 run

7:30 shower

8:00 oatmeal and tea

8:30 write/ read

12:00 lunch…

How I would love to have such a routine! Is there anything better than moving, unthinkingly yet willingly, between tasks one has set for oneself, like a well-oiled train on a new track?

But—perhaps because of Emerson—I have spent much of my adult life avoiding what I crave. After less than two years in an office job, I fled to graduate school, where I have more or less stayed since, and where each semester's class schedule upsets whatever routine I worked so hard to establish in the previous one. I am constantly forced to reimagine, adapt, grow.

I chose this life *for* the schedule—for the time to surf on a weekday morning, to run at 2pm, for the summers off—but it is that very schedule which bedevils me: I would (I imagine) be very happy knowing what I'm to do and when, without having to make a decision every hour of the day. But—the catch!—I would only be happy if I were the one setting the schedule in the first place. I bridle under a bridle; I hate the

dead time that fills an office job, I hate *obligations* (in one definition, marked *Obsolete. rare.* in the *OED:* "bond[s] by which a person is held captive").

But I also hate the endless barrage of questions that I must answer to throughout the day: Will I read or write or plan a lesson or grade papers or apply for fellowships or research my final paper or ditch it all for a long run? And in the meantime, there are the usual errands to run, meals to be made, dogs to be played with, skin to be scrubbed and washed. I chose this life for its freedom and so—naturally—it's that very freedom that presses upon me.

I remember my brother used to tell a joke when we were kids that went something like this: there are three construction workers working on a skyscraper in New York City: one Italian, one Chinese, and one American. One day, the Italian opens his lunch and says, "Spaghetti and meatballs—not again! If I get spaghetti and meatballs one more time, I'm going to jump off this building!" The Chinese man opens his lunch and says, "Rice—again! If I get rice one more time, I'm going to jump off this building!" The American opens his lunch and says, "A cheeseburger—again! If I get a cheeseburger one more time, I'm going to jump off this building!"

The next morning, they report to work. At lunch, they open their paper bags: the Italian finds spaghetti and meatballs and jumps to death; the Chinese man finds rice and jumps to his death; the American man finds a cheeseburger and jumps to his death.

At the funeral, the wives of the Italian and the Chinese men are sobbing—"Why didn't we make them something else? If only we'd known…"—but the American wife stands apart, stoic.

"Why aren't you grieving?" they ask her.

"John made his own lunch," she replies.

Driving lessons

1. The god of driving

My brother and I both learned to drive in New York City. We took lessons with a man made famous by a book one of his students, Amy Fine Collins, a "model and muse" to couture designers, wrote about him: *The God of Driving*.

I never read the book but, according to my mother, the narrative went something like this:

Amy had a lifelong phobia of driving, maybe caused by a terrible accident in her youth. She got divorced or experienced some other difficult life event from which one emerges with a strong desire to prove oneself to oneself and so set her mind to overcome this phobia. Enter Attila, a handsome Turkish immigrant, her driving instructor. He teaches her how to drive unafraid. In the process, they become best friends. I imagine it was pitched as 'the heartwarming story of an unlikely friendship'.

When my mom read the book, she decided that if my brother and I must learn to drive that we would learn only with Attila, the God of Driving.

The God of Driving first picked me up across from the apartment building where I grew up, a heavily trafficked city street. He exited the driver's side and told me to get in.

"Right here?"

"Right here."

I got in. I was scared but not as scared as I should have been.

I wrapped my hands around the wheel of the four-door sedan with STUDENT DRIVER plastered over its front, back, and sides. I placed my foot gently on the accelerator.

The God of Driving smiled encouragingly.

(I am skipping over the part where we made our introductions, where he gave me instructions—surely, he gave me instructions.)

I clicked on my blinker, pressed my foot down, and guided the car away from the curb.

Where did we drive that first day? They all blend together. The FDR. The Hudson Parkway. Morningside Heights. The East Village.

As we drove, we talked. The God of Driving had a German Shepherd and did one of the martial arts—Tai Chi, I think, or Aikido. He was incredibly calm and soft-spoken. He was an incredible driver.

Once, we drove up to Bear Mountain. At the top of the mountain, we got out and looked out, as the sign instructed. On the way back, we drove down a winding backroad.

"Go faster," the God of Driving directed.

The road was empty. He took the wheel and wiggled it. The car wiggled back.

"Cautious driving isn't the same as good driving," he said.

I wiggled the wheel, feeling the car jerk under my hands.

Once, I turned down a side street and got stuck behind a stopped garbage truck. We sat for a minute or two before he told me to stick it in reverse and

accelerate as he took the wheel, expertly guiding the car backward down the whole crosstown block, from the passenger side.

2. *What choice did I have?*

When I was 23, I totaled my parents' car.

In the years after I totaled my parents' car, I was a feminist who refused to take the wheel—or did so only when compelled and then with extreme caution as if the wheel, or my life, were a cup of hot tea in a porcelain cup.

I imagined cars not stopping at STOP and slamming into me as I inched across the intersection. I imagined switching lanes at the same time as another car on a three-lane highway and colliding in a fiery crash. I imagined accelerating when I should have reversed and smashing into a concrete wall in a parking garage. I imagined skidding out on wet roads into granite or a pine. I imagined taking a tight turn too fast, flipping over, hitting my head, and being airlifted to a hospital, where I'd die. I imagined being suffocated by the airbag.

As a passenger, I was even worse—gasping at sudden stops, bracing my hands against the dash, yelping, "Slow down! Slow down!"

I knew these fears weren't outlandish; I read about fatal car accidents nearly every day. I also knew I needed to drive. At 25, I had moved from New York City to Iowa City, where it was possible but difficult not to drive, and, at 27, planned to move to California. What choice did I have?

Before leaving Iowa, I bought a car: a black 1984 Mercedes sedan. I was alone in Iowa that summer—living out the last couple months of our lease and slowly

selling off our possessions before joining my husband in California. At the end of July, I was going to drive the Mercedes from Iowa to California.

At night, on the empty streets, I would take the Mercedes out with Franny, my dog, whining softly in the passenger seat. I drove slowly and deliberately with the calmest music I could think of playing on the lowest volume.

One night, after stopping in the park to take the dog for a walk, the car wouldn't start again. I panicked, called my husband. We decided I should walk home and return for the car in the morning.

A minute later, I realized I had left the car in neutral. I was lucky it hadn't rolled away.

That same summer, my friend Kris, also a New Yorker, was learning how to drive for the first time. He was preparing to rent a car, fill it with his stuff, and drive the 20-odd hours back to the city in July.

"Aren't you worried?" I asked him. "Driving all that way alone?"

"I was scared, at first. But then I realized: driving's just not that hard."

Anytime I drove anywhere, even in Iowa City, even to a place I drove all the time, like the supermarket just up the street or the dog park, I mapped it on my phone. I was afraid of missing a turn or taking the wrong one, of being forced to improvise, to turn around, take a route other than the one I'd already prepared myself for. I was afraid of being caught unprepared. Of not knowing what to do. Of getting lost, of being lost, of messing up, of needing to merge back onto a highway, of being forced to take a left turn onto a busy street without the soothing guidance of stoplight.

In the years before I didn't drive, I didn't bike. I tried to learn but every time I'd go free, I'd lose my balance and wipe out in a bloody tangle of skinned limbs. I didn't trust the bike, and I didn't trust myself to ride it.

It was easier to be passenger, to sit there comfortably and critique my husband's driving.

It was easier to be driven.

3. On being driven

I don't know any men who don't drive—just women.

Katherine was my best friend growing up. Before I knew her, her mom had left her career as a lawyer to be a stay-at-home mom. Her mom had either never learned to drive or had let her license lapse. In taxis, she'd often lean forward and yell through the plexiglass partition: "We aren't in a rush—slow down! Please. Slow down."

I grew up upper class in New York City, so we took a lot of taxis. I grew up being driven.

To be driven in a taxi, where you are always in the back behind a partition that prevents you, at least as a child, from seeing through the windshield, is to be removed from the activity of driving: You get in the car in one place and exit in another. You are moved without being made aware of the process behind the movement. Like a dog in an elevator.

When I was young, driving was something that happened to me. I did not see driving, and so I did not see cars, in the same way I didn't see the oven or the toaster.

They were machines that existed to serve me, and I took that service, and their dependability, for granted.

And, in fact, I loved to be driven. My grandmother, when she was alive, delighted in remembering how I, a mere five-years-old, would say, when she visited, "Let's take a taxi."

Being driven was okay but I yearned to drive. At summer camp, I begged the counselor to let me steer her pick-up down the dusty driveway. Weekends in Connecticut, I begged my parents to take me out to an empty parking lot where I could turn circles.

Most teens who grow up in New York City don't care about cars. But I did. I wanted to drive. I wanted to be like the teens I saw on movies and TV. Normal. A driver.

Katherine has since moved to L.A. but still hasn't learned to drive. She began wealthy and married wealthier, so, even as a non-driver, life is easy for her in L.A.: she Ubers everywhere.

Not driving is a luxury. If Katherine were not wealthy, or less wealthy, she would have been compelled to learn to drive just as she would have been compelled to get a job.

Her husband drives. Her husband goes to work. She is a stay-at-home poet and mother.

I simultaneously scorn and covet her life.

I have another friend, older than me, who struggles to support her two kids and her sporadically-employed freelancer husband on her meager salary as an adjunct professor. She grew up in London and cannot drive or chooses not to or cannot afford the additional expense of having a car. As a result, she takes the train from Berkeley, where she lives, to San José, where she teaches, and so doubles the amount of time she spends commuting, time spent away from her family.

Not driving is either a luxury or a necessity. Either way, its implications are financial. It is the middle class that drives. The rich are chauffeured, or they "go out for a spin." The poor commute.

4. 'I have ennui'

We live in the mountains, 30 minutes from town, in a house only accessible by a two-way single-lane road. I cried the first time we drove up to our house in my husband's SUV, weighed down with all our stuff.

"I can't live here," I said. "I can't drive this. We made a mistake. We have to move."

"Let's give it a month," my husband said.

At first, I chose not to drive. My husband dropped me off, picked me up, dropped me off, picked me up. Or I stayed home all day. We went everywhere together, or he went, and I stayed and when he came back, I'd rest the back of my hand on my forehead and say, with a hushed, melodramatic world-weariness, "I have ennui."

So, I began driving. I would only get behind the wheel with him beside me. "You can do this," he said, while I inched along the road in our tense, silent car, pulling over at every turn-out to let the frustrated drivers behind us pass.

A couple months later, I had worked up the courage to pick up the Mercedes, which had been languishing in a friend's parents' garage in Napa—a two-hour drive on crowded highways and narrow mountain roads. Halfway through the drive back, we stopped at IKEA, and I had a breakdown. I didn't think I could drive the rest of the way home—not on the famously fatal Highway 17 (its shoulders were littered with broken glass and torn bumpers), and not up Felton Empire, the steep ascent filled with hairpin turns and sheer drops, where we'd once discovered an accident before the cops had arrived: the car had smashed into a tree which held it in place on a sharp incline, the man inside moaning.

But: "You can do this," my husband told me, and so I put on the calmest music I could think of on the lowest volume, and I drove very slowly, behind him, pulling over for every car that approached, until we were home.

Soon after, I registered the car, got my California license, and started driving—some places—alone.

5. *The suburban dream*

When my parents visited, they decided the Mercedes was not safe on the mountain roads and decided to buy us a new car. I had always dreamed the suburban dream of receiving a car from my parents as a birthday or graduation gift but believed

the moment had passed along with my 16th and 18th and 21st birthdays. I was 28 when my parents bought me a car.

My new car was silver with black leather seats and a dainty steering wheel. My new car had four-wheel drive, a touchscreen center console, and Bluetooth audio capability. When the orange "empty" light blinked on, my new car could tell me exactly how many miles it could drive before running out.

"Now you have a nicer car than us," my parents said, smiling.

With the Mercedes, I had gotten more or less used to driving our roads but, with my new car, I began to enjoy them. I stopped mapping every single trip, and I started speeding. My husband joked that he was scared to drive me with me.

I was driving like a teenage boy. I was making up for lost time.

I knew I had really become a driver when I slowed down.

6. *My new car*

My new car gets 32mpg on the highway. My new car has an advanced frontal airbag system. My new car has side curtain airbags and driver and passenger seat cushion airbags. My new car is silver and smooth with rounded edges. It looks like a jellybean.

My new car is 189.9 inches long 72.4 inches wide, or 1,145.73 square feet. My new car is 0.02 acres. I own 0.02 acres. They are moveable and quickly degrading in value.

My new car has hill descent control, vehicle dynamics control, and a traction control system. My new car is automatic. It has bucket seats and an eight-way power

driver seat. My new car has a turning circle of 36.1 feet and a front headroom of 38.3 inches. My new car has heated seats. It is Japanese but was built in a factory in Lafayette, Indiana.

My new car and I live in Santa Cruz, California. Most days are sunny. But, in the winter, it rains and when it rains, it pours and puddles form in the road which the mist obscures. My new car has many features that make it extremely competent in all conditions; it is not afraid of hydroplaning into a tree or a ditch, of skidding out on icy roads. It doesn't care about the rain. It has new windshield wipers. It has no thoughts or feelings.

My new car holds 18.5 gallons of regular, unleaded gas. My new car has racked up 22,000 miles in only one year. My new car has Active Torque Vectoring and a 2.5-liter DOHC aluminum-alloy 16-valve 4-cylinder engine. My new car has a power tilt/sliding moonroof.

My new car is in the driveway now, resting, its engine letting out gentle *clinks* as it cools to air temperature, each of its parts shrinking and sliding against each other, like tectonic plates in miniature. My new car is a hunk of metal, inflexible and motionless, an object to be acted upon, not with. My new car is not 'smart'; it has no 'self', no pre-programmed ethical algorithm. All it has is a mechanical voice used to read the text messages that arrive while I'm driving.

My dogs love to be driven. They always bound into my car, ready for an adventure, then stick their heads out the open windows to sniff the breeze, their hair fluttering crazily in the wind. Simply being in my car, even at a standstill, seems to

make them happy. My dogs love to be driven, but they have no idea how a car works. Even the smarter one occasionally tries to get in my lap while I'm driving.

I love to drive my dogs but driving them also makes me worry. I worry their toenails will scratch or puncture my new car's leather seats. I worry about the mud, sand, and twigs they track in. I worry one will jump out an open window to chase a deer, I worry I'll brake abruptly—for a squirrel to cross the road, for instance—and send them flying into the back of a seat, giving them whiplash or a bruised skull or worse. I worry I'll slip off the road, rear end another car, get T-boned, and, without seatbelts to hold them in, my dogs'll smash through my new car's windshield and die. Or perhaps they'd even smash into me, and we'd both die. A dog in a car is a potential projectile.

There's no need to worry, my husband tells me.

But I do. I worry about hitting and killing a little boy running out into the road while I'm blinded by afternoon glare. I worry about another car running a red light and smashing into my survival space. I worry about cars backing into me in parking lots. I worry about smashing into a pregnant deer my headlights have frozen to the middle of the road. I worry about a water bottle rolling under the brake pedal just so. I worry about mileage, oil levels, dirty filters, worn tires and brake pads.

I shouldn't worry; my new car is sturdy. It's built for off-roading, steep ascents, and snow.

My new car weighs 3,726 lbs when empty. My new car has lights on the side mirrors that blink on when I walk toward it. My new car has interior lights and vanity

mirrors in her sun visors that I use to apply mascara and check for food in my teeth before teaching.

7. *My life is in your hands*

What is being driven like—for the car—I wonder?

I imagine it's very sexual. Like being naked on your back, blindfolded, wondering what's going to happen next. What's going to happen to you next.

My car doesn't understand the word "agency." I try to imagine it does. I try to imagine it's a 'she', to make her less strange and terrifying, soft and warm, not cold and mechanical, a hulking piece of metal that could crush me inside of it.

I vacuum her interior. I dust, and I polish. On warm nights, I keep her windows cracked.

I decide to give her a name. I give her the same name I gave the black one-speed Schwinn bicycle I bought off Craigslist and had to sell when I left Iowa, the same name I gave the Mercedes: I call her Alice. It doesn't suit her.

Alice has a ground clearance of 8.7 inches, at her base curb weight. Alice has daytime running lights and dusk-sensing headlights. Alice has fog lights and a rear window wiper. Alice has a post-collision safety system and a remote anti-theft alarm system. Alice can sense when a passenger is seated in the passenger seat, but sometimes she thinks a very heavy bag is a passenger. Alice can sense when a car is in my blind-spot and warn me not to back up or switch lanes.

I take Alice to the car wash, where we glide through the multicolored electric lights that make a rainbow of the soap, through the swishy lint-free cut-outs that make

me flinch as they smack the windshield, and finally, through the small vacuums that suction all the droplets up.

After, I use a tissue to wipe off the grime that's still gathered in the declivity surrounding her rear license plate. She looks shiny, beautiful, nearly new.

My life is in your hands, Alice, I tell her, both hands on the wheel.

Alice has turn signal mirrors, self-leveling headlights, emergency braking assist, 3-point seatbelts, rear door child safety locks. Alice has an overall five-star safety rating: five stars in a frontal crash; five in a side crash; four in a rollover. Alice was a 2018 Top Safety Pick by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety Highway Loss Data Institute.

A sentence from the report on how cars of Alice's make and model perform in driver-side collisions reads: *The dummy's position in relation to the door frame, steering wheel, and instrument panel after the crash test indicates that the driver's survival space was maintained very well.*

A sentence from my statement about what happened when I totaled my parents' car, of a similar make and model to Alice, reads: *I thought there was an "arrow" for a left turn, and that it was green. So, I turned. Without waiting. The oncoming traffic went full-speed ahead.*

There was no arrow. The oncoming traffic, a rental driven by a nice man in town for a wedding, hit the passenger-side of my parents' car but just ahead of the passenger, my friend Evan.

The airbags deployed into our survival space. I bit my tongue—hard enough to render it bruised and swollen a couple hours later—but Evan and I and my two friends in the back seat all walked away.

A good accident is one where everyone walks away, the nice man said to me, kindly, as I cried by the side of the road.

That car had to be towed. It was scrapped.

My new car is not my friend. My new car is a machine of death. A machine of death I enter happily, as if I were at home.

There is nothing either good nor bad but thinking makes it so.

I am thinking. Alice's engine is purring

as they say

but really it's more like a stutter

or maybe a mutter.

Five

Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

Made up

Every weekend, we'd stay up all night, taking staged photographs of each other: now as a bride, a painter, an actress. We bought matching shirts and capris and cardigans. We made weird smoothie concoctions; we made each other up. We played MASH; we played house; we talked to spirits on the Ouija board who told us we'd both date men named "Charles." We practiced our French kiss on the bottoms of glasses so the other could look through and critique the other's form. We told each other what to say when we chatted with our crushes on AIM. We read *Seventeen* and *Horse Illustrated*; we read *Cosmo* and *Teen Vogue*; we re-enacted the interviews of our favorite celebrities, recording them on an audio cassette. We dressed up together on Halloween—as a witch and a mummy, as Faith and Buffy, as twin flowers. We watched *The Blair Witch Project*; we watched *Cruel Intentions*; we watched *I Know What You Did Last Summer*.We loved the Spice Girls; we loved Britney Spears; we loved the Backstreet Boys; we loved *Buffy* and *Gilmore Girls*; we loved Emily Dickinson. We slept in the same bed.

One summer, we went to camp together, where we capsized a boat and painted rocks and adored the same boy, so tan in his clean white t-shirts. We had tickle fights; we had our first kisses, we had our hearts broken, we cried, we cast love spells. We went to Kentucky and rode horses; we went to Connecticut and played LIFE. We went on group dates. We deliberated, we commiserated, we did homework together. We ordered pizza and Caesar salad and sushi. We pretended we were horses, that the

baby doll was a real doll, that we were adult moms together, that we were famous writers.

I still have her landline memorized.

We talked about boys and horses and books; we talked on the phone on September 11th, which was the first day back to school, the first day she wasn't there with me. She left our school, and then a couple years later, I left New York for boarding school.

We made other friends. We didn't talk for a few years.

At the end of college, we starting to talk and couldn't stop talking and soon we were on the phone nearly every day. She'd just moved to L.A.; she was lonely, she hated it there. She had always been a poet, and I'd just begun writing poems. I flew out to LA that January for a week to stay with her and her boyfriend.

We ate frozen yogurt and Greek yogurt and drank Coke Zero. We went to Malibu and interviewed each other in the pool, pretending to be famous writers. We read poems to each other and watched *Mad Men*. We went to the De Young and the MOCA. We stayed up late, we teased each other. Her boyfriend told us we were like sisters.

Later that year, she came back to New York for her MFA, and though I was back in New York then too, she didn't call or text. Finally, I emailed, asking what had happened and whether she preferred not to hear from me. She sent a cordial reply, in which she said that she was *"*generally a little quiet and not a great correspondent" (hah!) and that she "hate[d] the phone" (hah!) and that she saw "even many of [her] closest friends rarely though [she] still feel[s] close to them" (haha!). It was as if she'd forgotten that I'd known her—I *knew* her.

She went on: "I also think, as I may have mentioned briefly before, I get really sensitive when I'm around any competitive spirit, especially about poetry. I may have been too sensitive, but the fear of competitiveness drains me—and when I feel sensitive to this, it shuts me down."

So that was it: we couldn't both be poets.

Now she occasionally messages me on my birthday, or likes a photo I post on Instagram. That's about it. We aren't friends.

A competitive person

Whenever people hear that I went to Harvard, they ask, Wasn't that competitive?

Sort of, I'd say. But it wasn't terrible.

Or: Yeah, kind of, but only at certain times of the year.

Or: Maybe, but it always motivated me.

Or even: Yes, but not really among my friends.

Or, finally: I guess, but what does it mean to be competitive anyway? I mean it's not like people were asking to see each other's grades. (Or were they? I can't remember.)

Truly, I had no other frame of reference. My mom is competitive (not a good sport). My dad is competitive (a good sport). My brother is competitive (a good sport), and, as the younger sibling, I was always losing to him, it seemed. Sometimes I would pull ahead in Monopoly, and he would fall into bankruptcy, and I'd take pity on him and give him some cash. And then he'd beat me. The lesson? Do anything to win. And: kindness and compassion will screw you.

I grew up in a competitive family, I too am competitive (a bad sport), and yes, I went to so-called "competitive" schools.

What does it mean to be competitive anyway? A competitive person cares about relative rather than actual success; she cares less about being good than about being better. A competitive person requires a peer group of people close to her skill level—too good or too bad, and there's no competition; it's either unfair or

"embarrassingly easy." Thus, the competitive person (me) only wants to be relatively better, the best within a very select group; she craves the mere illusion of skill. She is perfectly aware there are hundreds, probably thousands, maybe even millions, of people who are better than she is, that she is nowhere close to being the actual best—a fact she chooses to forget only when she wins.

In all, this is a bad quality to have, especially as a writer. After all, relative success is meaningless. While she lived, Emily Dickinson was Nobody. I am trying—in theory—to be Nobody, while—in practice—striving to be Somebody—to publish and build a name for myself so I can get a teaching job that will enable me the space and freedom to continue to write—as Nobody.

When I was little, I hated doing anything I couldn't immediately do well: math, basketball, figure skating. It was embarrassing to try and to fail, and I took no pleasure in the 'learning process' when it involved struggle. I wanted to do only those things which came naturally to me—writing, reading novels, translating Latin, loving dogs—and, because I was competitive, I wanted to do them better than anyone. I wanted to read the most books; I wanted my teacher to single *me* out as the most promising writer in my grade; I wanted to be fastest to conjugate and decline; I wanted all the dogs to love *me* most. 'Small pond' goals.

But even in them I fell short: Katherine K. always read the most books; Elizabeth M. was singled out as most promising; in Latin… in Latin, it's possible I was best at school, but, at home, my brother, three years ahead of me, was always better. And, of course, our family dogs loved my mother the most.

So, even when pursuing what interested me most, I was always aware of my progress relative to others and was so focused on proving myself that I rarely stopped to consider my own intellectual progress. Being competitive made me focus on others—both their achievements and their perceptions of me. It motivated me, sure, but simply to jump through hoops, not to *do*. I achieved for the sake of achieving. It has taken most of my twenties to learn how to learn.

That stupid, bitter feeling

I remember once sitting outside with an ex-boyfriend, shortly after we had broken up, and seeing a mutual acquaintance, a Russian graduate student, walk by. Her name was Vera, she had long dirty-blonde hair with blunt bangs cut across her narrow forehead, was medium height, very thin, very pale—almost tubercular. She always dressed in shades of grey and black. "If I could pick," I said to my ex, "I'd look like her."

"I think you did okay," he said.

It was true; I was prettier than Vera, but I envied her: her age, her skinniness and height, her Russianness, her sense of purpose, and her style. From afar, to me, she seemed like someone who knew who she was and was being it, fully. I was a Russian major with a very open, American face. Who was I fooling? I would never speak Russian fluently, much less have the infamous "Russian soul." How I coveted that soul! (Even while disparaging it publicly, in class, as an exoticizing intellectual fiction.)

Envy, for me, often began like this—out of a simple desire to be someone else, someone who, seemingly, had her shit together.

But it also came as unadulterated longing for something another person had. My husband is also a writer. When we started dating, he'd already published in all the journals I admired, and his first book was about to come out. Editors frequently emailed asking him to send new work. I had yet to publish anywhere and could barely

paste a smile on my face whenever he told me about the next great thing that had happened to him.

"But," he said, once I'd explained myself, and the stupid bitter way I felt, "you can't see it that way at all—you against me. We're a unit. A win for me is a win for you. And vice versa."

When we got married, a couple of weeks later, a friend gave us a card. "You don't know how I envy your relationship," he wrote.

A few years later, when we published a translation we'd collaborated on, he said nothing at all, though we were still, all of us, supposedly close friends.

Because of that translation, my husband was invited to a conference on surrealism the same weekend I was already set to present at a conference on translation. His conference was better: he, along with some of the most eminent scholars on surrealism in the world, saw a performer remove items from her vagina on stage; they ate chocolates fashioned to look like miniature cups of hot chocolate and transparent slices of pumpkin pie.

A week or so after he returned home, he got a letter in the mail in an elaborate flowered envelope. The seal had unstuck in the mailing, and he wasn't home, and I was so curious that I pulled out the four postcards and read them. It was like the letter of someone falling in love or intending to fall in love. She told him random details about herself, her life, asked him question after question, spoke of his "magnetic presence." I felt like I was falling. I had somehow never thought of my husband out in the world, the potential subject of someone else's imagination and desire.

When I got him on the phone, he explained that she'd been flirting with everyone at his table and got all of their addresses.

I wasn't interested in her at all, he said.

The opposite, he said.

I feel sick, he said.

Me too.

I envied her a little, I realized. She had gotten to see my husband anew, as I had when I'd first met him. I could never see him that way again.

I knew I was a Californian

When, as a sweet romantic surprise, I parked next to my husband's car in a public lot.

Without expression

As a girl, I preferred to stay home with a book because books enabled me to see the world without having to be in it. Reading energized me; talking made my face tired.

To be the person you'd think I am if we met—to project that person like a hologram onto the screen of myself—requires most of my energy, even when I'm being "me." Because of this, I have always detested "hanging out": being in a large group, unable to relax, never fully on or off, always half there, knowing I might, at any moment, be asked to snap into it, to perform some version of myself. But which one? Not knowing makes hanging out a state of constant low-grade stress. With one person, I know who they expect, and prefer, me to be, who I *can* be, the limits of what to say and when. With a group, I am inevitably forced to be a version of me someone doesn't recognize.

I write, in part, so I can speak with expression without making an expression, filling the page while my face remains blank. My hands never tire of typing.

For much of my life, I avoided hanging out; I would see just one or two friends at a time. It wasn't only that one-on-one gave me more control (though I enjoyed the control), but that it allowed for a greater depth, focus, and intimacy than I found in larger groups. In those conversations, something could be got at, could be understood. Sometimes I could even forget "Emma"; I could be me—whatever that meant.

In groups, I felt as if we were all jockeying for status, no one listening, everyone sharing anecdotes just to top another's. After being interrupted or ignored yet again, I would usually shut up, zone out, let my face relax, prompting someone to note later that I'd seemed bored or out of it. So, I didn't hang out.

Then I got married.

My husband hangs out with his high school friends, his college friends, his grad school friends; he even hangs out with his family. Over the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, they all—his aunts and uncles with their nine children, his parents, his sister and her boyfriend, and us—come over to his grandparents' house ostensibly to eat dinner but mostly to sit in the same room doing different things. The kids play games, the teenagers scroll through their feeds, the adults respond to emails and talk casually, neither forcing a conversation nor evading one if it arises.

For me, this was purgatory: unable to work or read with the constant distractions of noise and people, yet also unable—too anxious around strangers, too bewildered by the environment in which I found myself—to have a conversation. Just sitting there silently exhausted me. What should I say, do? If I said nothing, would they think me rude, unpleasant? That I didn't like them?

At first, I would retreat early, simply go downstairs to read in bed before everyone had left. But, because it was important to my husband, I tried harder to stay upstairs. I usually focused my attention on the dogs or the younger kids, who were eager to engage, happy to have a playmate or an audience. Even so, most nights I couldn't resist excusing myself early, and whenever I did, my husband would tell me

I'd missed out on a great conversation. These conversations became mythical; they never seemed to happen while I was there.

My family never hangs out. When we're together within the bounds of an accepted social activity—dinner, drinks, walking the dog—we're together, talking, engaged. Though we may technically be together—that is, in the same room—at other times, we're not hanging out; we're simply in the same place, doing different activities, each with the understanding that, while reading or working or even watching TV, we prefer not to be disturbed.

My husband never seems to mind when I disturb him. He rarely seems to mind anything. It's one of the qualities I love most about him. He lets everything in.

A brilliant man

People are always telling me my husband is a brilliant man. Just yesterday, a friend was saying that when she mentions me to anyone in our PhD program who doesn't know who I am, she tells them I'm his wife, and "He's *brilliant*," they always say.

We recently got an email from the department cautioning us against gender bias in the letters of recommendation we write for our students. According to an ornithologist at UConn, whose email had been forwarded to someone at UC-Santa Cruz and then disseminated within the literature department:

> There's strong experimental evidence that…female candidates (and candidates of color) are…harmed in the review process by letter writers using certain terms and framing that evoke negative stereotypes. In brief, men get longer letters that describe them in agentic ("drive") and talent ("brilliant") terms, framed with a focus on accomplishment; women and candidates of color get described in terms of effort ("hardworking"), and framed with reference to stereotypes about personality traits ("she is a very caring person", "lively").

I know that my own conception of myself, as presented in this manuscript, does perpetuate this bias. My grandfather, my brother, my husband—all brilliant. Me—hardworking. In theory, this doesn't bother me. I'm proud of being hardworking. Brilliance alone won't take you anywhere. And the "brilliant" men I know, know this too. They're all hard workers; that's part of what makes them brilliant, just as my brilliance is part of what makes me hardworking.

My parents ran into an old Russian professor of mine at a party in New York once. Once they discovered the Harvard-Russian connection, they asked her if she

knew me, and she—according to my mother—said, "Emma Wood? Oh, she was my student—she's brilliant! Just brilliant!" My mother was so proud, repeating the "brilliant" again and again, with a smile big enough to hear through the phone.

I wonder who else, if anyone, has ever called me brilliant.

I can tell people are surprised when they meet my husband. *He's so good-looking! What a catch! How impressive!* are all different ways of saying I married "up." On bad days, when I am mean and grumpy and angry at him for losing the car key for the fifth time that week, I wonder how he fell in love with me at all. I wonder what it feels like to marry "down."

Since I have been with my husband, those bad days are fewer and farther between; the gap between the person I am and the person I have wanted to be has closed, if only slightly. But I know that no matter how narrow that gap becomes, I will always feel slightly inferior to him. But maybe—using a mode of thinking my husband has taught me—maybe this is the kind of relationship I need to become the best version of myself.

Many women marry their fathers; I have always prided myself on the fact that I did not. But, in a way, I did marry my older brother. Though my husband and my brother are not really alike at all, I have, in marriage, replicated the relationship I had to my brother through college. Growing up, my brother and I have shared the same interests (reading, writing, French, Latin, running), and, for a time, I did everything he did, just three or four years behind, and not quite as well. His teachers became my teachers and to them, I was always C—'s little sister, C—, the *brilliant* scholar!

I resented him for most of high school because of this, but I can see now—always only now, only in hindsight, only in the reconstructed narrative of my past—that the need to prove myself is what, until recently, pushed me to work as hard as I did. I can be naturally lazy, overly satisfied with my work, inclined to think *I* am brilliant even if no one else does. I needed—I need—someone to help me set the benchmark farther out.

So, I bridle when my husband says I'll be the famous writer, not him.

You're the brilliant one! I say. You're my *brilliant* husband!

Then, eager to prove ourselves to each other, we both get back to work.

The next right thing

For a long time after we got married, my husband and I considered not ever having a baby. We didn't make a lot of money, but even on our middle class combined incomes, we made enough to do most of what we wanted to do: we traveled, we ate out, we bought organic fruits and vegetables, we slowly decorated our home, we saved. Eventually, or so we had heard, we would make more money, which meant that even without a baby, we could continue on our slowly upward trajectory. We liked our life together, and we wanted it to continue as it was, more or less, and also not having kids was supposed to be better for the environment and so having them was frowned upon by liberals of our generation, especially in the context of a heterosexual marriage like ours.

Rationally, I could see all the reason not to. Rationally, I wanted that happy, peaceful, baby-less life. My parents had friends who'd never had children, and they had rich, full lives—so many friends and hobbies, such nice clothes and well-decorated houses, such seemingly-perfect marriages. And, on top of that, there was the question of *why*, of *what is the point* especially when the world seemed to be on the verge of ending for real this time, and when most of the reasons to have a baby seemed selfish: because *I* want one or the experience of having one. Because *I* want more of me. Because *I* don't want to grow old alone.

My husband especially struggled with these questions because he didn't have the same physical imperative that I did. My mind said one thing—*why?* and *no!*—but my body said another and more passionately: *Have a baby now!* It had been saying

that ever since we got married. *Have a baby. Have a baby. Have a baby*. Once, when we were still in Iowa, only a few months after the wedding, maybe less than a year since we'd known each other, I said I wanted to have a baby to "have something to write about." Clearly, I was not ready to have a baby. But I wanted one. My body wanted one.

Some of my female friends have never had this biological urge. Probably it was not only biological because it got much worse when we moved to Santa Cruz, and I made friends with women who had children, and so began to want them even more.

Even though I was used to being in control of my body in many ways, it wasn't an entirely one-way street from brain to body. I listened my body, too, and I believed in what it had to tell me like *rest today—no running* or *eat oranges if you're craving oranges* or *have a baby*. Essentially, I believed if I wanted a baby that, no matter what my mind or philosophers or journalists said, it was the right thing to want—it meant I was supposed to have a baby, this baby.

I am not as prone to existentialism as my husband; I don't like to ask the big questions: *What are we doing here? What is the point of life? Is writing a worthwhile thing to do?* I don't see the point. I am literally and metaphorically myopic; I am only interested in that which is right in front of me. (My husband has said he wonders how I became an artist, given this constraint. I have wondered this too.) But, because of it, I accepted that if I wanted to have a baby, we should have a baby, and I believed it

was right because who would not want the opportunity to exist—even if the world were ending, even if that existence would be cut short?

And I am more selfish than my husband, too. I wanted more of us. I didn't want to miss out on being a mom. I wanted something to write about.

My husband wasn't entirely sure until after I got pregnant. One day, he felt visited by our daughter, who was filled with gratitude that we were going to give her life, and he was suddenly filled with gratitude toward his own parents, for allowing him to exist, and he said he knew then it was the right thing to do.

An attempt at profundity

There is great satisfaction in staying silent in a laughing audience.

A second attempt at profundity

There is great satisfaction in laughing in a silent audience.

Six

Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?

Routine hard work

Even though I've been running at least five miles six days a week, rain or shine, time or no time, for the past four years, even though I'm training for my fifth marathon, even though I ran cross-country in high school and track in middle school, even though I spent a chunk of my childhood being pushed around Central Park by my jogging dad, even though my dad still runs—the same loop—three times a week, though my brother's a runner, though my mom set track records at her junior high, though my husband has run 50-mile races, though my mother-in-law has competed in 100-mile races and plans vacations around 50-milers and 50ks—I feel I have nothing to say about running that hasn't been said or seems too obvious to say.

I could say it makes me feel alive and grateful to be alive, that there's no better feeling than running to the beat of a mindlessly happy song, that it humbles you with the reminder you start over anew each day, that it keeps you 'present'—it doesn't matter how far or fast you ran yesterday or last week, what will you do today?—and, in this way, is a metaphor for writing, for living.

That it teaches you the importance of recovery and rest, that there will always be good and bad days, that some days should be fast and others slow, that it will often get harder before it gets easier.

That the miles pass quicker with friends but sometimes you won't learn what you're truly capable of if you always run with others.

But the reverse is also true: sometimes it is only around others that you realize your potential.

That real-time data—gleaned from smartphones and running watches—can help but also hold you back.

That you can almost always go farther and faster than you think.

That half of doing anything is believing you can. That the other half is routine hard work.

That your body is an idiosyncratic machine, that your legs are not isolated pistons, that what hurts most after a long run is often your shoulders, that we laugh and cry at the same thing.

That what can be done in the sun can be done just as well in the rain.

That the pleasure of getting clean is amplified by the pleasure of getting very dirty.

That, before going out, you should look in the mirror and remove at least one piece of clothing.

That shoes are meant to be worn, dirtied, worn down.

That what at first seemed impossible will become habitual, that what felt like masochism will come to feel like self-love, that you will adapt, that recovery will get easier, shorter, that one day you will wonder how you ever got through a day, a week, a month, a year without running, that you will wonder that you ever thought it was a chore.

That you can't run the same trail twice.

That your only worthy competitor is yourself.

Small, terse, sharp, smart

In 2016, I discovered the artist Jenny Holzer. In the 1970s, Holzer wrote over 300 truisms riffing on clichés such as: “Awful punishment awaits really bad people,” “Moderation kills the spirit,” “Words tend to be inadequate,” and “You are a victim of the rules you live by.”

I was riven with jealousy; why hadn’t I thought of this first? The aphorism was the literary form of my soul: small, terse, sharp, smart.

In 2016, I began imitating the artist Jenny Holzer: “You can’t judge a book by its mother,” “Write what you kind of know,” “Buyer despair,” and “Your guess is as gross as mine.” I wrote them down in my iPhone notes as they came to me then tweeted them out, singly, in all caps.

Five months prior, I had graduated with an MFA in poetry. We had just moved to California. I wasn’t writing any poetry. Instead, I was writing Jenny Holzer rip-offs for Twitter, and judging from the likes and retweets, no one thought this project was genius except for me. I thought these aphorisms would make their way, somehow, into one of my poetry manuscripts. But, when I did have a manuscript, and I tried to insert a section of them, it didn’t work. Maybe I could use them in some other way. I experimented with typing them in huge, non-serif fonts and in bright colors across old family photos. The result was interesting, but that was about it.

Eventually, the aphorisms stopped coming to me. I tried to keep the project going by googling lists of common sayings and rewriting them, cleverly, but these—

"All's fair in love and offshore banking," "Vermouth will set you free"—fell flat. I was forcing it. The project was done. I didn't have close to 300.

What I loved about my aphorisms (and Jenny Holzer's) was the way they subverted expectations: you expected wisdom and got its opposite—and yet, even in that opposite, a kind of wisdom still existed. Even the silliest, most nonsensical statement, when placed into an aphoristic form—short declarative sentences, heavy on the imperative, delivered with conviction—seem wise, in an oracular kind of way.

"Inspirobot" is a website with an aphorism-generating algorithm that pairs its pseudo-inspirational sayings with trite images: a sunset, a woman looking down from a mountain, a field dotted with sheep. You click the "Generate" button and get a new phrase, a new image each time: "Do it again and again, do it, and if you're lucky, you will become the most important person in the world," "Create smart devices," "Memories are merely ambitions begging for forgiveness," and "Warfare is the perversion of our certain death." These sayings are randomly generated by a robot. And they are silly—especially the first, with all of its verbosity (unusual and therefore funny to encounter in the aphorism, the most compact of forms). But they also make a weird kind of sense—or, rather, it is impossible not to try to read sense into them, to trust them, to find wisdom in them, as if they were the product of some greater power—the Oracle at Delphi, say—not an algorithm invented by two dudes for a good laugh. In other words: speak with authority, and you will be believed.

I have a love/hate relationship with the aphorism. On the one hand, it is, like a poem, a compressed, fragmentary statement that opens onto a larger field of meaning and knowledge—onto the unknown. On the other hand, it is, like a poem, a compressed, fragmentary statement that strives to be a totality: complete, authoritative, final. The aphorism is at once an opening up—an invitation to contemplate an idea—and a closing down—a directive, an instruction, an irrefutable assertion.

Though we often think of them as standing alone, independent of each other, aphorisms usually come in collections, like poems or essays. They rely on the surrounding fragments to deepen their meaning. To create a whole.

I thought once I'd write a whole book of aphorisms. Instead, I'm writing this book.

Appendix:

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN BIRDS

BE THE STRANGE YOU WISH TO SEE IN THE WORLD

EIGHT PERCENT OF SUCCESS IS THROWING UP

GIVE ME LIBERTY OR A NEW DRESS

HOME IS WHERE THE GUN IS

IF YOU BUILD IT THEY WILL NOT COME UNLESS YOU HAVE AN AWESOME AD CAMPAIGN

PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN GLASS HOUSES SHOULDN'T

PEOPLE WILL NEVER FORGET HOW YOU MADE THEM VEAL

HISTORY IS CONDEMNED TO MICROFICHE

HOPE IS THE THING THAT FESTERS

THERE'S NO FREE BRUNCH

THE ONLY THING YOU HAVE TO FEAR IS YOURSELF

THOSE WHO CANNOT FINISH THE PAST ARE CONDEMNED TO REHEAT IT

WRITE WHAT YOU KIND OF KNOW

YOU ARE WHAT YOU REPEAT

YOU ARE YOUR OWN WORST FRENEMY

YOU CAN'T JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS MOTHER

YOUR GUESS IS AS GROSS AS MINE

The thrill of the chase

I have always loved it.

In preschool, I publicly proclaimed my love for John Waterfall before he'd said a word to me.

In middle school (pre-email), I spent days drafting the perfect letter to mail—with a stamp and everything—to M., the tannest, richest, most popular girl in our grade. In it, I confessed how much I wanted to be friends with her and asked if we could maybe 'have a playdate'. She took me aside in homeroom after she received it: "I got your letter. It was real good. And, yeah, we should hang out sometime." We never did. But at least I had tried, would never have to wonder *what if*.

In high school, after being twice rejected, I asked out the boy who 'took' me to prom. Third time's the charm.

In college, at the tailgate for the Harvard/Yale football game, I ran into an old fling—we were drunk, we flirted, eventually I asked if I could kiss him. "That would be so nice," he said, "but actually I'm dating someone right now." Oops.

After college, at a holiday party, I somehow persuaded a man—a real man; he was eight years older than I was—to give me not his number, but his email. I still remember the thrill that went through my whole body when, the next day, I pressed 'send' on an email asking him out for a drink.

In grad school, I pursued a few people, who did not become my husband, as the man who would pursued me—but passively enough I could eventually feel it had

been my decision to date him when I finally capitulated. A few months later, I proposed.

Growing up, I had long fantasies about being pursued, and yet, in reality, whenever I was pursued, I chafed. I wanted to be the one in control, the one holding the reins not the one bridled.

Whenever I'm called upon to give love life advice, I always say the same thing, something that amounts to—*just say it*, *don't beat around the bush*, and *you'll never know if you don't ask*.

In theory, it is this final point—*you'll never know if you don't ask*—that drives me; I am always looking back and tormenting myself with *what if?*

In practice, it is the sudden throb of pride in my own daring, the nervous shiver that follows then the constant tremor of anticipation—a tingling that keeps me awake late and gets me up early, that makes green greener, the day newer, better than the one before, my mind crisp as a sheet of shiny, blank fax paper—that drives me. *What will the answer be?* The mind holds the question in one corner while going about its daily chores made undaily by its secret presence. That pleasurable pain of not-yet-knowing, of living in the space between yes and no, the question waiting, aquiver, in space.

An idea as far-fetched as God

My husband grew up Mormon. He served a mission, ages 19-21. Religion barely figured in my life growing up. We'd go to church, maybe on Christmas Eve and Easter but because the services were beautiful, not because they were services. I envied my close friends who sang in a church choir. What I knew about religion I knew from books and travel. The closest I got to God was the awe I felt in old stone cathedrals. Sometimes I tried praying. I don't remember about what. Eventually, feeling that my whiny, sporadic prayers might offend, I stopped. I began keeping a diary instead. Since I always imagined someone reading the diary, it served the same purpose as prayer: a confession, a cry for help. For some time before I hit adolescence, I said I wanted to be a nun when I grew up. Preferably Catholic because of the Latin services, the Sistine Chapel, and the rosary.

When my husband first told me he grew up Mormon, I couldn't (so he tells me) keep the shock and disgust off my face. I had grown up with people who went to church or temple every weekend, but they were Jewish or Protestant. There was the occasional lapsed Catholic. Almost no one had sacrificed anything for religion, despite the fact that our parents' parents' parents' parents had, in fact, sacrificed everything for it.

When I met my husband, I had only ever known one Mormon from high school. He was (as everyone said; I barely knew him), *so* nice, but we mostly gossiped about everything he wasn't allowed to do—like go to the school dances because of the curse words in rap songs the student DJs played. I didn't get it. All of

my life had been directed toward opening as many doors as I could and keeping them open as long as possible; I didn't understand why anyone would want to close even one—and so young—especially for an idea as far-fetched as God.

When I first visited my husband's family, I felt like a tourist. I spoke cautiously, observing his family as if on the other side of glass, unable to fully engage. I fixated on what I couldn't do around them: drink alcohol, for instance. I wasn't hiding anything, they knew I wasn't Mormon—and they were liberal Mormons, after all—politically liberal and generally more open and relaxed than my own family—but, still, I felt I couldn't drink. And not being able to drink became emblematic of the kind of inhibition and constriction I felt around them.

I saw this same unease in my father when we spent the night in Utah with my grandparents-in-law. He didn't know how to conduct himself. (Why did we think we needed to conduct ourselves differently?) When my husband's grandfather brought out a bottle of artisanal soda, my dad thought, for a moment, that it might be wine and leaned forward to read the label. When he realized it was soda—which he never drinks, categorically, because of the sugar—he sat back and crossed his arms, declined a glass with a muttered, "No, thanks."

Maybe I only fully relax around people I don't know well when I'm drinking, and so maybe I am never relaxed around my husband's family. Maybe it's that drinking provides a soft collective focus, a kind of shape to an otherwise aimless, shapeless activity—hanging out. Maybe it's that my desire to fit in, to feel myself a part of the group—to seem Mormon, like them (as that is, for me, their defining

characteristic)—pushes me to act in a way that is inauthentic—the end result being that I'm not really myself around them because I'm focused on trying to be someone else, someone I imagine to be more "like them."

It's as if I can't see beyond their religion, and so I imagine they can't either, as if their faith were always present, at the front of their minds, when, in reality, it's so much the fabric of their lives, and of the lives of everyone they know (they live in Utah), that they probably don't think much about it all.

I believed in Heaven

When I was eighteen months old, I fell into a pool. My father was engaged in conversation, so I would have drowned if my three-year-old brother had not seen me and yelled. I can still see my father's worry-lined face as he pulled me from that soft substance back into the air.

In the first grade, my world began to blur: sharp-boned faces were suddenly rendered edgeless as spheres, telephone poles formless as shadows, and the chalked angles of math class dissolved into wraiths, abstract and ethereal. It was like living underwater. Until then, mathematics had seemed to be the purest form of realism: with its precise lines, numbers, and laws, it pinned down the wonderful like a butterfly to a board. Until then, mathematics described what I saw. The day I lost my claim to perfect vision, I lost my faith in math.

At around this same time, I decided that I wanted to be a Catholic nun. In my daydreams, I trained crimson roses on a white trellis and swept the slate floor of my narrow cell while the cold beads of my rosary, tucked beneath my habit, pressed like a promise into my sun-snubbed flesh. Afterward, I would speak to a gravel-voiced priest through soft wooden webbing: *Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned*. I believed in Heaven.

When I asked my father whether he believed in Heaven, he said no.

- If not, then what do you believe?

- I don't believe.

- Don't believe what?

- I don’t believe anything happens after death.

For weeks I fell asleep in the icy clasp of nonexistence as terrifying and unfathomable as the brilliance of burnt-out stars. I would pinch my warm skin and try not to sob. Where would it go?

When I was twelve, I went to Camp Kamaji, the same traditional Midwestern summer camp my mom had attended as a kid. Everyone there had to pass a swim test which involved jumping into the icy lake fully clothed, removing the heavy, waterlogged items, swimming a certain number of laps, and treading water for ten minutes. Even though pretty much everyone passed it, I was still proud when I did too.

When I was 22 or 24, I was in Stonington, the coastal town in Connecticut where my parents owned a home, and my parents’ water-obsessed dog Lily, spying a buoy she thought was a ball, ran down a grassy slope in the dog park, out onto the dock, and leapt into the water. It was mid-February or March. There was no shore nearby, she wasn’t coming back to the dock, and even as she did, she couldn’t climb back onto the dock on her own, nor could I pull her up. Lily paddled around, looking panicked. I cried out for help. But it was winter in a coastal town; no one was around.

Finally, I removed my jacket and jumped into the water, thinking I could lift her out. Almost immediately, the cold numbed me, and I still couldn’t get her out, and then I had trouble getting myself out. But I did, and, once back on the dock, I was somehow able to pull her out as well. We ran home, shivering.

Something had happened to me. It felt like something had happened to me. But everything else was the same.

"I am a free human being with an independent will."

I recently reread *Jane Eyre* for the first time only because it was assigned in "Studies in the English Novel," a section of which I had been assigned to lead as a teaching assistant. I realized then that I had been afraid to reread it.

I thought of the book as integral not only to my identity but to my Second-Wave-ish idea of feminism. I could still remember reading Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert's book *The Madwoman in the Attic* in college—how I emerged from my room totally stunned and told my roommate that the concept of rationality was itself a sexist construction, frequently deployed to undermine and even stigmatize women—so much for the god I had worshipped!

Much later, *Jane Eyre* still held its status as an iconic feminist novel for me, and so I named my MFA thesis "No Bird," a phrase taken from Jane's famous assertion: "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will."

I had been a vocal and self-proclaimed feminist for a long time. Though I would never have admitted this, I liked that feminism (or feminism as I understood it) enabled me to perceive myself as a victim. It was as if I could hide the powers and advantages my social class had given me beneath the disadvantages of my gender. And it meant I could blame my failures on a force larger than me, on *the system*. Mostly, though, my feminism made me feel angry and disenfranchised and confused—could I still be feminine and be a feminist?

Even though I still consider myself a feminist, I am wary of my old tendency to see sexism everywhere, to turn every question into a gender question. Feminism is a pair of glasses I have trained myself to look through, and I am trying to un-train myself so that I can see something closer to what's really there. What I try to hold onto from feminism is Jane Eyre's statement: "I am a free human being with an independent will." It is an argument for the humanity of every person and so, more generally, for humanism.

Rereading *Jane Eyre,* I could feel myself thrilling to the old feminist fight (poor Jane! poor Bertha!) while also, simultaneously/paradoxically, falling under Rochester's thrall. He had kept his first wife locked in a dark garret for ten years. He had betrayed Jane—not once, but continuously—then tried to convince her to abandon her principles and be his mistress in the south of France. He was imperious, deceitful, selfish. And yet—I fell in love with him alongside Jane. I wanted the happy ending Brontë gives us.

None of my students did; they all seemed to hate Rochester and to *want* to see the novel as retrograde, as the kind of work that—like so many—fights against but then ultimately reaffirms established cultural norms.

I didn't want to see this. I wanted to preserve my perception of *Jane Eyre* as a revolutionary novel, one that could still be "unproblematic," one I was still permitted to love. I didn't want to read it as a construction of whiteness, as a post-colonial minefield, as racist or conservative.

So, I didn't.

So, I saw the long narrative surrounding St John Rivers as a satirical critique of the white male savior complex. So, I saw Jane as asserting her own free will and independence and, above all, her humanity, by *choosing* Mr. Rochester, in spite of his flaws and his mistakes. (For, in spite of all he does wrong, he is the only who truly sees Jane—sees in her the fairy, the imp she sees in herself.) So, I saw Brontë reaffirming humanity, in all of its messiness and contradictions. So, I saw her showing that, no matter what we believe or how strongly, those beliefs shouldn't—indeed, can't—determine our fate. That feeling, not rationality, should always be central. So, I saw an argument for a "feminine" approach to the world alongside an argument for freedom and equality. So, I saw the revolutionary text I wanted to see.

(I'm worried, of course, that my desire to defend and exonerate *Jane Eyre* is a conservative desire; that, though I might push against social boundaries, I am ultimately destined to reaffirm them; that in constructing myself, as I did as a girl, after the tiny, weak, ghostly-pale Jane Eyre, I was constructing my own traditional femininity and whiteness; that I was putting up barriers against anyone "different from me"; that I was instilling in myself the idea of woman-as-victim; that I was overestimating the effect of class in relation to race; that I was refusing to see history; that, in accepting Gilbert and Gubar's argument for Bertha as Jane's "dark double," I was erasing Bertha as a person in her own right (if a person in a novel can ever be a person "in her own right"?); that I was terribly, so terribly wrong; that *Jane Eyre* is not a revolutionary novel; that it is, in fact, as my students and the professor believe, British colonial propaganda; that it is, after all, upholding the marriage plot and

traditional gender roles and a certain ideal of female purity and innocence. And yet—couldn't it be both?

The fainting game

Cross your arms over your chest as tight as you can, until your fingers press into your shoulder blades. You are squatting, and you breathe deeply, while your friend, standing, counts down from ten. When she reaches "one," you will jump up and your friend will grab you with both arms, squeezing you into her chest and compressing yours in the process, and you will lose consciousness. You will faint.

When you come to, it will feel like maybe an hour has passed, but, your friends—you are with a group—will tell you it only lasted about ten seconds. They will ask you what it was like, what happened. You will tell them you had a dream; sometimes they are in the dream, sometimes not. You will ask them what happened, too. They will tell you that your eyes were open, fluttering. It was scary—you looked possessed. You will want to do it again.

It is freshman year of high school, and this is the first time you have ever fainted, though you have long dreamed of doing so—of elegantly collapsing onto a dusk-colored *chaise longue* so some tall, dark, handsome man could revive you with smelling salts. You did not know—or knew but didn't care—that women fainted so frequently in the 19th century because the corsets they wore to attract said man constricted their breathing. To you, fainting, and the frailty it represented, was desirable not only because it seemed to epitomize the feminine but because that feminine was unmistakably upper-class, aristocratic. The working-class woman—and, since this is the 19th century, the peasant—couldn't afford to be frail; she had to work.

Although women no longer wear corsets, fainting still predominantly affects them—in emergency settings, women are four times more likely to faint than men. Science can't yet explain it—there is blood pressure, heart rate, iron deficiency, and anatomical differences—but it's hard not to think the higher rate is partly due to psychology: whatever messages the culture machine may put out about 'strong women', we are still the 'weaker sex'.

A year later (you're now a sophomore in high school), you will wake up in your dorm room and run through your roommate's bedroom to the bathroom to be sick. You will feel cold but sweaty, dizzy, pained, scared. You will go back to your room to call the health center, and you will come to on the ground, your back against your desk, the phone beeping your hand, your roommate standing over you, looking panicked. You will tell her you are sick, though she will know this already, and she will take the phone and dial the number and when you get up, leaning on her, you will black out again. She will help you downstairs and into the campus security car that is waiting to take you to the health center, where you will sleep through the night and nearly all of the next day.

Three years later, you will be in Ghana, and you will visit the Elmina Castle, a beautiful, white building constructed by the Portuguese and later taken over by the Dutch, which served as a hub in the Atlantic slave trade. You will take a tour. You will see the airy, light-filled rooms with their ocean views where the white Europeans lived, and then you will walk downstairs and see the dungeons they lived atop, including the room where 1500 African men could be crammed at one time (the

women were kept separate), with no space to lie down, no place to relieve themselves except where they stood, and where they could spend up to three months waiting for the ship that would take them through ‘the door of no return’, to serve as slaves in Brazil and other colonies. Standing in that stone cellar, that holding cell, hearing the tour guide rattle off these unbearable facts, you will grow dizzy and hot, and, without saying a word to the guide or your friend, you will rush out of the cell and into the open air, where you will sit on the steps, looking out on the ocean, taking deep breaths and willing yourself not to faint. Someone will offer you a snack, some bottled water. You will not faint.

An empty vase

On my *curriculum vitae* (‘course of life’; one of the few Latin phrases I can still translate), I claim:

French – reading proficiency
Russian – reading proficiency
Latin, Ancient Greek – limited reading proficiency

I studied Latin for seven years, French for six, Russian for four, and Ancient Greek for two. Now I wonder, where did all that the time go? It’s been nearly fifteen years since I last read in Latin or Greek. I don’t have limited reading proficiency in either.

I’ve translated pieces of *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*, the poetry of Horace and Catullus, but the only sentences that seem to stick with me are from my first-year Latin textbook, *Ecce Romani*, phrases like: *Ecce! Puella sidit sub arbore. Puella qui sidit sub arbore nominat Cornelia. Cornelia est puella.* (Look! A girl is sitting beneath a tree. The girl who is sitting beneath the tree is named Cornelia. Cornelia is a girl.) Yes, it’s true: after seven years of study, two at the “advanced” level, all I have to show for it is the vocabulary and syntax of a child. With Greek, which I studied the least amount of time, I’ve barely held onto the alphabet.

When I wrote the above sentences in Latin, a part of me was pleased—even proud—I had retained enough to do even that. A part of me has always thought, what does it matter if I’ve forgotten? What I’ve forgotten, it seems, are the words; the grammar remains: I can recognize cases and verb endings—past, present, future, participles. And what are words but flowers in grammar’s vase? And yet, now, I see, well… Without the flowers, what is a vase? Empty. Decorative. Maybe not even a vase. It could be a cookie jar, a sculpture, a water glass.

The words always seemed inconsequential to me—definitions to be memorized, or rememorized, at will. If I wanted to relearn Latin or Ancient Greek, if I wanted to restore my French to its heyday, to get my Russian back to where it almost was in college, it would be simple: a matter of vocabulary. I imagined my knowledge of language as one of those tiny colored sponges shaped like small animals—a horse or a duck—that, once immersed in water, would grow to regular toy-sized proportions.

I am a writer. What was I thinking—that words don't matter? It's taken me an entire lifetime speaking and reading English to learn how to use certain words. Now, I tell my students grammar doesn't matter. But the words do. There's no other way of saying what we mean.

The controlled, controllable environment

Every time someone new reads this manuscript, I ask them if it's working or if it needs more of a through-line, a narrative arc, and if so, do they have suggestions for what that could be?

One professor who reads a few early essays thinks that through-line is work.

My advisor thinks it's control—about my need to have it, to be in it.

My friend, a novelist and a mother, thinks it could be motherhood—doesn't it provide the perfect exit to this spiral of introspection I've compelled myself to follow? Doesn't it make sense, too, that I would want to understand my own childhood before creating someone else's?

Many other readers had no answer—they prevaricated.

I hate prevarication, indecision.

For a while, I get very worked up about the motherhood narrative. But though it might provide a neat ending, it doesn't help organize the thousands of words I've already written, unless I plan to set it up, from the outset, as a "motherhood" book, which I'm not interested in doing. It doesn't feel correct—to have written a motherhood book before I've even become a mother.

In the end, I think my advisor is probably right: the question of control does seem to be there, beneath every surface I scratch.

For instance, this past weekend, I found myself remembering how homesick I used to get, as a child and even as a teenager. I was constantly being separated from parents, and usually by choice, even though it invariably made me miserable. Early

on, even the smallest separation distressed me. When we visited my grandmother in Switzerland, they sent me and my brother to ski school—no one spoke English, I wasn't a strong skier, I never wanted to go, and would throw a tantrum the morning of. And yet I always ended up going.

Then there were the summers they sent us out to visit our grandmother who was living in France at the time or to Connecticut with our babysitter while they worked to pay her salary during the week, and all the sleepaway camps I attended, and then boarding school, and then college…

I was wondering why I grew up so homesick, even though I thought of myself as highly independent, and even though I had so often opted to go. So I did some googling. It turns out homesickness is directly linked to control. According to Caroline Bologna (real name), when we're homesick, "[w]e're longing for something that in our minds is known, predictable, consistent, and stable." It would follow that those who dislike change the most—who crave habit and control—are the ones who experience the most homesickness.

I was a homesick child because I liked to be in control, or disliked being in situations I couldn't control, so much that I always wished to return home—to the predictable, consistent, and stable, to the controlled, controllable environment.

I just knew I was going to glow

I only realized once I got pregnant how much I had romanticized pregnancy—probably because very few of my close friends had gone through it. I scrolled through Instagram pictures of pregnant women running and working out, their bumps small and tight beneath their lycra tops, their arms still so slender, and thought, *That will be me!* I imagined myself racing half marathons well into the second trimester with a cute "Baby on Board" sticker taped to my singlet. I imagined feeling radiant and looking round-but-small in a long, flowy dress. I would get to *grow life*—and I *couldn't wait* to experience it. I just knew I was going to *glow*.

I wasn't stupid: I had read up on the symptoms. I knew how uncomfortable, even miserable, pregnancy could be for some women. *For some women*. I was convinced, however, I would not number among them. Why? Hubris, maybe, combined with an unwillingness to believe it could really be *that* bad.

And then there was the fact that I have always been lucky, healthy. I have never broken a bone or been seriously ill; I don't yet have any chronic aches and pains. The worst I had suffered was a retinal detachment at 22—strange at such a young age, but straightforward enough to treat. Otherwise, aside from fighting various alien growths—in high school, doctors attacked an enormous wart at the base of my big toe with a razor (a process as bloody as it sounds) and with liquid nitrogen until, one day, the whole thing just peeled off; then, in college, I had a ganglion cyst the size of a golf ball surgically removed from the back of my wrist—I had been fine, unscathed. I had kept myself so. Safe.

And, then there was also the fact that I was used to being in control: my body had more or less always done whatever I wanted of it. I wanted to run a marathon in 3:30, and I did. And then I wanted to run it faster, and I did, and so on, until I ran a 3:14 on a hot day at Boston, a famously hilly course. I had training plans, and I stuck to them, and I stayed injury-free, and the races always seemed to go according to plan—or even better than planned. I was in control. In fact, that was one thing I loved about running—the spreadsheets of mileage and paces seemed, so far, for me, to translate perfectly into results. It was one of the rare instances in life where the plan *worked*.

The physical is usually the realm that is supposed to teach us humility—that is supposed to show us there are certain things we can't control. And I had felt that sometimes—for instance, when I'd fainted or gotten violently sick, all of a sudden—but not consistently, and not in any big way.

And so, going into pregnancy, I thought I was different, that my pregnancy would be different. I didn't think I'd feel seasick for a month; I didn't think I'd vomit every morning for another two; I didn't think I'd be so exhausted I could barely complete all the tasks I needed to do to keep my jobs; I didn't think I'd lose all interest in reading and writing, in the things that defined me and that I needed to keep doing to justify my life; I didn't think running would exhaust instead of energize me or that my nose would be constantly stuffed up or that I'd suffer from sinus headaches and regular headaches and backaches and eye twitches or that I'd gain so much weight so early on. I didn't think I would lose control, that my pregnancy wouldn't go

according to “plan,” that my body would feel alien to me and huge even before it was huge.

Whenever pregnant women experience symptoms like insomnia or nausea or any of the other million things that might prevent them from keeping to their usual schedules and routines, mothers love to smile smugly and sweetly say, “This is all good preparation for when the baby’s there!”

“The baby’s already here!” I want to yell whenever I hear this.

The baby is already here. It’s a thought that comforts me. It’s not preparation. She’s here. She’s creating space for herself, in my body, in our life. She’s saying, “Hey, mom. You aren’t in control anymore. And it’s okay. It will be okay.”

Part II: Supplemental Essays

"I am not a melodramatic person": Defining the lyric diary

"Like superficial spirituality, looking on the bright side of things is a euphemism used for obscuring certain realities of life, the open consideration of which might prove threatening or dangerous to the status quo." – Audre Lorde

"Oprah has trained Americans to say anything anywhere… no longer do we see confession as intimate and full of silences." – Claudia Rankine

"A work that accumulates out of an exhausted life, out of the narrative momentum of survival energy, is by its nature fragmented, coming in starts and stops, manifested out of any available time." – Kate Zambreno

I. Genre

When I was at Iowa, I started writing a long prose piece. I was a poet; I wrote poetry; I thought of it as a poem—it never occurred to me that it could be anything else. But, when I brought it to workshop, my professor Jim Galvin said, I don't know what this is. But it isn't a poem.

This surprised me. Wasn't it a poem if I called it a poem? Wasn't it a poem even if it didn't move in the way he expected a poem to move? I knew that as much as I wanted to be able to say, it's a novel! (Oh, to be a *novelist*!) that I didn't want it to be read as a novel or even as a memoir—that, indexed in any other way, it would seem deficient: not enough character, not enough plot, not enough pages, not enough description. That only reading it as poetry would enable it to be seen and accepted as it was—associative, sideways, subtle, rhythmical, as much about language and syntax and sound as anything else. And yet—perhaps Galvin was right. While the frame of

the poem had been freeing to me as a writer, perhaps it was not helpful to the reader. And perhaps it was not a poem after all.

Galvin's comment about my work forced me to confront the question of genre and to realize for myself what I had only previously felt—that genre was not just a useful tool for publishers and booksellers, but a powerful frame for readers and writers alike. Or, as Jonathan Culler succinctly explains in his essay "Lyric, History, and Genre," "Generic categories frame both reading and writing—writers write in relation to other texts and textual traditions, both consciously and unconsciously, imitating, misreading, and rejecting, and readers approach works differently according to how they conceive them, even if those expectations are going to be disappointed."[1] As a writer, I was most interested in writing in relation to lyric poetry as a genre, and as a reader, I wanted to approach nearly all experimental works, it seemed, also as poetry. I have long been interested in form and as soon as I realized the effect changing generic "frames" had on me as a reader, I became very interested in thinking critically about genre as well.

I soon learned, however, that the study of genre—not surprisingly for a society increasingly interested in fostering "fluid" and "hybrid" identities—was not exactly cool. Many see any interest in genre as narrow, definitional, essentialist, outdated, oppressive, and unproductive. As far back as 1967, René Wellek writes in his essay "Genre Theory, the Lyric, and *Erlebnis*," that "[o]ne must abandon attempts

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[1] Jonathan Culler, "Lyric, History, and Genre" (2009), in *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Virginia Walker Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 64.

to define the general nature of the lyric or the lyric. Nothing beyond generalities of the tritest kind can result from it."[2] Though directed at the lyric in particular, Wellek's derisive statement could have been directed at many broad generic categories like the "novel" or the "essay."

In his 1986 defense against these and similar attacks of genre, Ralph Cohen refutes the idea that genre studies are essentialist and static:

> Genres are open systems…Members of a genre need not have a single trait in common since to do so would presuppose that the trait has the same function for each of the member texts. Rather the members of a generic classification have multiple relational possibilities with each other, relationships that are discovered only in the process of adding members to a class.[3]

Rather than see each genre as a negative category—that is one established through a process of subtraction and elimination based on a set series of established traits—Cohen posits that each genre is an evolving "open system" that is perpetually expanding as literary works continue to be written. And only by adding new works to certain generic categories can we fully see the relationships between texts and trace the transformation within and between genres over time.

Jonathan Culler has since taken up and expanded on Cohen's defense of genre, writing:

> [Genre] is a claim about fundamental structures that may be at work even when not manifest, a claim which directs attention to certain aspects of a work, which mark a tradition and an evolution… The test of generic

[2] René Wellek, "Genre Theory, the Lyric, and Erlebnis" (1967), in *The Lyric Theory Reader*, 51.
[3] Ralph Cohen, "History and Genre" (1986), in *The Lyric Theory Reader*, 58.

> categories is how far they help relate a work to others and activate aspects of works that make them rich, dynamic, and revealing…[4]

First, Culler notes that genre is a "claim"—i.e. something subject to questioning, doubt, and revision—"about fundamental structures that may be at work [in a text] *even when not manifest*." In other words, identifying whether a text "fits" in a certain genre is not simply about ticking off some boxes of certain superficial characteristics. It's about something more—what Culler calls "fundamental structures," a phrase that sounds concrete enough, but that I read as a stand-in for the ineffable, for the *feeling* that one text is somehow related to another. A generic claim is valuable (not just a game for scholars!) insofar as it places the primary text within a matrix of other texts, texts that lead readers to develop richer and more dynamic readings of the primary text. In sum, genre is a lens through which we view a text: the wrong lens will blur it, while the correct one will sharpen and clarify. Or as John D'Agata writes in his introduction to the first in his series of anthologies on the essay, "[N]omenclature, while often limiting, polarizing, inadequate, and always stupid, can also be the thing that opens up our genre to new possibilities and new paths of inquiry."[5]

It is with the aim of sharpening and clarifying, of enriching and revealing, of opening to new possibilities, that I propose a new generic category: the lyric diary—

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[4] Culler, "Lyric, History, and Genre (2009)," 66.
[5] John D'Agata, *We Might As Well Call It the Lyric Essay* (Seneca Review Press, 2015), 10.

an "open system" I have been reading and adding to since I moved to Santa Cruz, and in which, with "Personal Statement," I have also been writing.[6]

II. The Lyric Diary

Jenny Boully's *The Body*: *An Essay*. Suzanne Buffam's *A Pillow Book.* Heather Christle's *The Crying Book*. Amy Fusselman's *Idiophone*. Rivka Galchen's *Little Labors*. Sheila Heti's *Motherhood*. Heidi Julavits's *The Folded Clock*. Sarah Manguso's *Ongoingness.* Maggie Nelson's *Bluets.* Sigrid Nunez's *The Friend*. Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation*. Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*. Sarah Vap's *Winter*. Kate Zambreno's *To Write as if Already Dead.*

Reading these books, which shared certain themes and formal qualities, and which I usually identified by their slim spine, small press, woman author, and certain keywords like "lyrical" and "uncategorizable" in the jacket copy, became an obsession for me. And yet while I loved some of these books immediately, others got under my skin, often frustrating and sometimes even annoying me. Still, their pull on

[6] In a 1996 essay, Charles Altieri uses the term "lyric diary" to describe the form of Lyn Hejinian's book-length poem *Cell*. He doesn't take the time to explicate the term; however, based on context, for him a lyric diary seems to mean a loosely chronological record written in verse that depends on a traditional narrative structure—e.g. each entry building to a climactic moment. He uses Robert Lowell's book of poems *Notebooks 1967-1968* as an example of a "classic" lyric diary, and sees *Cell* as working with but also against the form. As you will see in these pages, my notion of a "lyric diary" is quite different from Altieri's. I am also treating it as a genre rather than as a form; Charles Altieri, "What Is Living and What Is Dead in American Postmodernism: Establishing the Contemporaneity of Some American Poetry (1996)," in *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology,* ed. Virginia Walker Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 482.

me was undeniable—I felt drawn to them, and I knew it was because I saw myself and my own writing in them.

During the time that I began reading these books (2016), I was also starting to teach first-year writing at both UCSC and San José State. In my pedagogical training, I was taught that the first step to teaching a student to write a successful piece in any genre—whether academic, journalistic, or creative—is understanding the conventions of that genre. As I read and thought more about genre, I realized that understanding the genre of a given work is also a crucial step for successfully *reading* it. The genre helps the reader read a work on its own terms.

So, as I set out to understand my obsession, I started first to think about genre—because one thing all of these books have in common is that they do not fit neatly into a single generic category. Some are published as poetry, others as fiction, yet others as memoir or essay. And the more that I thought about the genre of these works that obsessed and confounded me, the more I saw that the labels publishers had slapped on them were not helping me to see the book on its own terms. In fact, to read Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* as a novel actually made me dislike it because it wasn't doing most of what I expect a novel to do. As a novel, it seemed lazy. What if, I wondered—what if I read it as a *poem*? Immediately, my mindset shifted: I no longer expected developed characters, plot, fully-realized scenes, a story told "straight." It was (*of course*, I thought to myself) told "slant." Offil had created a web of associative, paratactic connections, instead of a plot; she had focused on language and rhythm instead of character or scene. As I began to reread Offill's book with this new

set of generic expectations in mind, I found all of my prior discomfort with the book dropping away. This time, there was no friction. I felt I understood what she was trying to do.

And I knew then that my answer lay in genre: in order to help other readers—or at least this reader, at least myself—at least understand, if not enjoy, this group of books, I would need to devise a new generic category for them. That category is the lyric diary.

Sometimes called a novel, sometimes an essay, sometimes a memoir, sometimes a poem, the lyric diary is a slender volume in which a first-person narrator records experiences alongside facts, ideas, and quotations. The lyric diary refuses the narrative arc, instead taking on the lyric's associative logic ("tell all the Truth but tell it slant") as well as the diary's serial, episodic movement. It weaves research and quotations (from verse, the Bible, letters, other diaries) into life writing—like Suzanne Buffam placing anecdotes about her young daughter alongside the history of the pillow in *A Pillow Book* or Maggie Nelson telling the story of her broken heart alongside the history of the color blue in *Bluets*.

The women who write a lyric diary are often mothers (Sarah Manguso, Heidi Julavits, Jenny Offill, Sarah Ruhl, Sarah Vap, Suzanne Buffam, Kate Zambreno, Rachel Zucker, Amy Fusselman, the list goes on), writing either tangentially, or wholly, about the experience—about the fragmentation of time and attention that follows birth, about the sleepless, dreamlike unreality of the first few months with a newborn, and the formal and stylistic shift these experiences produce.

Marketers struggle to describe it:

> Not a narrative. Not an essay. Not a shopping list. Not a song. Not a diary. Not an etiquette manual. Not a confession.
> —the jacket copy to Suzanne Buffam's *A Pillow Book*.

> *The Body: An Essay* is a meditation on absence, loss and disappearance that offers a guarded "narrative" of what may or may not be a love letter, a dream, a spiritual autobiography, a memoir, a scholarly digression, a treatise on the relation of *life* to *book*.
> —the jacket copy to Jenny Boully's *The Body*

Booksellers struggle to shelve it: *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* is indexed as "Essay/Poetry"; *Bluets* as "Essay/Literature"; *The Crying Book* as "Social Science/Memoir."

Critics struggle to describe it:

> This quietly revolutionary little book is extremely difficult to qualify.[7]

> Julavits adopts the structure of a typical diary. Her work, however, defies categorization. Part memoir, part essay and part stream-of-consciousness reflection….[8]

> *Savage Park*…is part memoir, part manifesto, part philosophical treatise, part poem, and part immersion journalism, with photos.[9]

Readers struggle with it, period:

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[7] Ariel Djanikian, "Baby and the Book: On Rivka Galchen's 'Little Labors,'" *The Millions*, June 22, 2016, https://themillions.com/2016/06/baby-book-rivka-galchens-little-labors.html.
[8] Hope Reese, "Review: 'The Folded Clock' by Heidi Julavits," *The Chicago Tribune*, sec. Books, accessed February 21, 2021, https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/books/ct-prj-folded-clock-heidi-julavits-20150430-story.html.
[9] Emma Winsor Wood, "The Rumpus Interview With Amy Fusselman," October 2, 2015, https://therumpus.net/2015/10/02/the-rumpus-interview-with-amy-fusselman/.

> I enjoyed this book but was disappointed at how short and sketchy it is, more of a pamphlet or chapbook by a serious and appealing writer. And none of her diary writing is included, it's about writing the diary, a nice essay, not quite a book . . .
> — a three-star Amazon review of Sarah Manguso's *Ongoingness*

> One should want to walk alongside the author and accompany them on adventures. Spinning tops for six hours straight isn't interesting to me, nor is the idea of carrying objects around such as a kitchen sink tap handle, then drawing the tap handle, and further musings about: the tap handle. I'm going back to traversing through book four of *My Struggle* by Karl Ove Knausgaard, an infinitely more dramatic and exciting read.
> —a one-star Amazon review of Heidi Julavits's *The Folded Clock*

> No names, no plot, no real ending…not my kind of book.
> —a one-star Amazon review of Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation*

The lyric diary is so challenging for publishers, critics, and readers alike, I think, because it takes inspiration not just from established literary forms like the memoir, the essay, and the prose poem, but from a number of "non-literary" modes of women's writing—most notably the diary, but also the letter, the account book, the datebook, the scrapbook, the family bible, the shopping list, and the recipe. In its fragmentation and "ongoing" quality, the lyric diary also seems to emerge from the archive of incomplete "discovered" works by women writers: Sappho's fragments, Sei Shonagon's pillow book, Emily Dickinson's envelope poems, to name a few. The lyric diary is a "feminine" form—not only because mostly women are writing it or because it is often explicitly about the toll exacted by domestic and emotional labor, but because it has grown out of a literary tradition of women's writing, which includes a long history of "non-literary" writing. Many lyric diarists are also poets.

Some of the books are published by presses that primarily, or exclusively, publish poetry.

The lyric diary is composed of "shreds" of prose—either short, stanza-like paragraphs set off by white space (Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation*, Sigrid Nunez's *The Friend*) or as short essays (Heidi Julavits's *The Folded Clock*, Rivka Galchen's *Little Labors*, Sarah Ruhl's *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write*).[10] The shreds create the feeling that the lyric diary has been "fitted…into the odd spare moment, or made room for at the end of a tiring day" and a few are explicitly framed that way—as work that has either been crammed in alongside the "double shift" of childcare and other domestic tasks, or simply written in time that was intended for something else:[11]

> …Sorry. In the act of writing that sentence, my son, William, who is now two, came running into my office crying… In any case, please forgive the shortness of these essays…"[12]

> I am now several years into this practice of trying to write a poem about winter during the pieces of time I find to be alone.[13]

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[10] As Kathleen Ossip writes in her introduction to a lyric essay/hybrid work, "I think of the form as 'shreds,' thinner and quicker than paragraphs, and without the neat transitions that tend to exist from one paragraph to the next." Kathleen Ossip, "The New Critic on the Couch," in *Family Resemblance: An Anthology and Exploration of Eight Hybrid Literary Genres*, ed. Marcela Sulak and Jacqueline Kolosov (Rose Metal Press, 2015), 40.

[11] This and other quotations from this paragraph come from Valerie Raoul, "Women and Diaries: Gender and Genre," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 22, no. 3 (1989): 61.

[12] Sarah Ruhl, *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write: On Umbrellas and Sword Fights, Parades and Dogs, Fire Alarms, Children, and Theater* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2014), 3–4.

[13] Sarah Vap, *Winter: Effulgences and Devotions by Sarah Vap* (Noemi Press, 2019), 10.

> That day I find I can't work, so in the margin of my notebook I write a dialogue.[14]

Like the diary, the lyric diary takes as its subject events and non-events that are historically considered "too trivial for inclusion in 'a book,'" is grounded in "the domestic scene" (home, children, family), and in it, what is "normally considered marginal in a man's world becomes central":[15]

> The baby loves to look at photos of babies.[16]

> There are always other mothers at the school. Some of them arrive early, and because of this it is the same ones who notice every day if I am late.[17]

> I ask my sister if she's seen the commercial for Diflucan, a new yeast-infection medication that is less messy than the suppository Monistat.[18]

And yet it is not confessional, exactly. The first poets to be described as confessional (Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton) wrote about then-taboo and "non-literary" subjects—the details of their married lives, their struggles with depression—from an explicitly autobiographical position. At the time, it was a radical gesture. But since then, as Rankine writes in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, *"*Oprah has trained Americans to say anything anywhere… no longer do we see confession as intimate

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[14] Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (Graywolf Press, 2004), 16.
[15] This and other quotations from this paragraph come from Raoul, "Women and Diaries," 61.
[16] Rivka Galchen, *Little Labors* (New York: New Directions, 2016), 33.
[17] Jenny Offill, *Dept. of Speculation* (Knopf, 2014), 42.
[18] Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (Graywolf Press, 2004), 77.

and full of silences."[19] The lyric diary marks a retreat from confession as the public tell-alls customary on daytime talk shows and a return to the intimate, often halting, private confessions between two people—a mode it enacts through the interruptions, gaps, hesitations inherent to the form.

These shreds are usually written in declarative statements with regular syntax, simple diction, and little, if any, figurative language; they feel informational, deadpan, clipped; the affect, flat. In *Ongoingness*, Manguso writes, "*I want to write sentences that seem as if no one wrote them.*"[20] The sentences in the lyric diary get close to that. Here is an exemplary passage from Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation*:

> I run into an acquaintance on the street, someone I haven't seen in years. When I knew him, we were both young. He edited a literary magazine and I sometimes wrote for him. He had a motorcycle but married early, both of which impressed me. He is still very handsome. As we talk, I discover he has a child now too.
>
> "I think I must have missed your second book," he says.
>
> "No," I say. "There isn't one."
>
> He looks uncomfortable; both of us are calculating the years, or maybe only I am.
>
> "Did something happen?" he asks kindly after a moment.
>
> "Yes," I explain.[21]

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[19] Rankine, 53.
[20] Sarah Manguso, *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015), 16. Emphasis is in the original.
[21] Offill, *Dept. of Speculation*, 50–51.

In this shred, Offill does not ground us deeply in either the setting or in the narrator's state of mind (though we do sense her bitterness in what she chooses to observe—"He is still very handsome"); she gives us nothing more than the facts we need to understand the scene. The writing itself is declarative, the sentence structures repetitive and simple ("I run… He edited… He had… He is…). The editor feels like a character sketch rather than a character, the scene, similarly. The ending is particularly characteristic of the lyric diary: "Yes" *is* the narrator's explanation—but, of course, it isn't an explanation at all. The narrator of the lyric diary often seems reticent, unwilling or unable to fully "explain"—choosing instead the elliptical ("Yes," I explain) or silence, represented by a single "return" key of a blank space. This inability/refusal to explain, to give closure to even some of the smallest moments, is part of what gives the lyric diary its lyric feel. As Takashi Hiraide writes, "I believe that the essence of poetry is in its fragmented nature. I instinctively feel that any attempt to bring closure to poetry or to explain it is what kills the poetic nature."[22]

Offill's stylistic choices (which are also characteristic of the genre)—the brevity, the clipped declarative sentences, the flat affect and unmusical prose style, the refusal to explain, the tendency to aphorize—also speak to the emotional state of the genre's narrator: she is not simply sad, but depressed, numb, unable to emote.

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[22] Takashi Hiraide, "Poetry That Isn't Poetry: The Fragment as Center in Postcards to Donald Evans," in *Family Resemblance: An Anthology and Exploration of Eight Hybrid Literary Genres*, ed. Marcela Sulak and Jacqueline Kolosov (Rose Metal Press, 2015), 96.

Offill's style can thus be viewed not just as elliptical but reflective of her narrator's depression and the absence of feeling that accompanies it. The narrator's inability to explain, and so to engage and connect with the editor, reinforces this reading—depression being a state which makes connection and communication with others seem impossible. Perhaps to Offill's narrator, inhabitant of one in the hermetically sealed bubble of her depression, the answer "yes" *does* seem like explanation enough; perhaps she has lost her ability to distinguish between speaking (making statements) and communicating (speaking with the desire to be heard and understood).

The narrator of the lyric diary is depressed: she is heartbroken (*Bluets, The Body*); she is recently postpartum (*The Crying Book, Dept. of Speculation, Little Labors, Ongoingness*); she is grieving a loss (*The Friend, Don't Let Me Be Lonely*). Where the confessional poets possess what could be characterized as an excess of feeling—evident in the vivid language and bold images, the voice's often-crackling energy—the lyric diarists display a lack where the usual full-to-bursting expressive lyric "I" would be. Through this inversion of our expectation of the lyric, the lyric diary evokes and complicates the lyric and the lyric "I," both becoming part of the lyric tradition and working in tension with it.

This tension is perhaps gendered. In *Gut Feminism*, Elizabeth Wilson writes, of women and depression:

> One of the most common explanations of depression is that it is anger turned inward… This has been a particularly popular explanation for depression in women… Because women are more likely to suffer emotional and economic losses than men, and because these losses receive insufficient social recognition or restitution, the anger of women sometimes morphs into a toxic

> internal state of self-reproach, hopelessness, and guilt. It is for this reason, it would be argued, that women are two to three times more likely to be diagnosed with a depressive illness than men.[23]

Whether the "problem" is in the rate of diagnosis of women or whether women are actually more prone to depression is unclear (and likely unknowable), but the result is the same: rates of depression are much higher in women than men. Depression is a woman's illness. Perhaps the woman writer's need to write about her depression has necessitated her turn to the lyric diary. The lyric diary marks a turn away from lyric-in-verse, with its debunked-but-nonetheless-still-real Romantic association with intense feeling, as well as a turn away from traditional memoir with its expectations of detail (scene, setting, plot, explanation) and connection. Its depressed/depressive state is essential to the genre and is part of what makes the lyric diary a radical text. As Audre Lorde in *The Cancer Journals*, an antecedent to the lyric diary, writes, "[L]ooking on the bright side of things is a euphemism used for obscuring certain realities of life, the open consideration of which might prove threatening or dangerous to the status quo."[24]

This paucity of detail—the "sketchiness" of the scenes and characters, and even of the first-person narrator herself—is central to writing depression: in my experience, depression engenders a feeling that explanation is pointless, because any connection to the Other seems impossible. I can tell you things, give you

[23] Elizabeth Wilson, *Gut Feminism* (Duke University Press, 2015), 68.
[24] Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (Penguin, 1980/2020), 66.

information—but I cannot hope to make you understand, to make you feel as I feel.[25] And yet, the lyric diary *is* an attempt to make the reader understand the isolation and emptiness that depression brings—by recreating the texture of depression through its formal features.

The opening shred of Heather Christle's *The Crying Book* dramatizes this turn away from the conventional lyric:

> I suppose some people can weep softly and become more beautiful, but after a real cry, most people are hideous, as if they've grown a spare and diseased face beneath the one you know, leaving very little room for the eyes. Or they look as if they've been beaten. We look. I look. Once, in fifth grade, I cried at school for a reason I cannot recall, and afterward a popular boy—rattail, skateboard—told me I looked *like a druggie*, and I was so pleased to be seen I made him repeat it.[26]

Crying—a brief, intense expression of extreme emotion—can be read here, and throughout the book, as a stand-in for the lyric. We can then gloss Christle's sentences accordingly: "Some people can weep softly and become more beautiful"—some people can experience a thing and write a soft, beautiful lyric poem about it. "But after a real cry, most people are hideous"—however, a "real" expression of experience is not beautiful but "hideous." It renders the speaker monstrous and other ("a spare and diseased face beneath the one you know"), leaving "very little room for

[25] I had postpartum depression. Whenever my husband would ask me questions in an attempt to draw me out, I'd reply, *What's the point. You wouldn't understand*. *And you can't help me.* Or *Isn't it obvious?* as if depression were the only possible response to my current situation.
[26] Heather Christle, *The Crying Book* (Catapult, 2019), 1.

the eyes"—the lyric eyes (those windows to the soul!), a homophonic and symbolic stand-in for the lyric "I."

This is an anti-lyric statement: a "real" expression of experience or emotion can't be communicated through the lyric, which softens, smooths, beautifies. Christle's resistance to the first-person pronoun underscores the point: she begins by distancing herself from the criers ("some people…they") until she eventually admits she is one, trying out the first-person plural first as a kind of last-ditch effort to avoid inhabiting the "I": "We look. I look." In light of the lyric diary's connection to depression, it also reads as a failed attempt to inhabit the first-person plural—to claim a community, a "we." This speaker is still only an "I"/a 1 (one) /alone.

The paragraph ends with Christle sharing a specific personal anecdote; however, although there is now a first-person speaker, she still actively refuses to inhabit the lyric mode—first, by not telling us why she was crying (traditional subject of the lyric), and secondly, by putting figurative language—*like a druggie*, a simile (and an ugly, "unpoetic" one at that!)—in the mouth of another ("a popular boy"—another unpoetic figure). The anecdote, and especially the simile, implies an addictive relationship to crying, and to the lyric: crying gets me attention therefore I want to cry more. The lyric thus becomes a "cry for attention"—perhaps an addicting one ("I looked *like a druggie*").

The anti-lyrical tendency we see in *The Crying Book* and other lyric diaries is certainly linked to depression; however, it can also be read as a turn away from the

lyric, and creative writing more broadly, as another kind of emotional labor.[27] Most casual readers (and perhaps not so casual ones too) expect creative writing, and especially lyric writing (that intense bout of feeling!), and perhaps *most especially* any lyric writing by women, to make them feel things. As Arlie Hochschild writes, "How can the flight attendant tell when her job is done? A service has been produced; the customer seems content."[28] Similarly, how can the writer tell when her job is done? A service has been produced; the customer-reader has been *moved*. The lack of affect displayed in the lyric diary can therefore be seen as an act of rebellion, a refusal to move the reader, at least through traditional modes like narrative and figurative language—a refusal that is all the more (or perhaps *only*?) striking coming from a woman, given the still-pervasive cultural confusion between the feminine and the emotional. However, this refusal to display emotion (e.g., to perform emotional labor) can also be read less optimistically, not as an active refusal, but rather as a sign of utter affective exhaustion. The page is the one place where the woman writer can finally drop her responsibility to perform any emotional labor or work—the one place where she need not conjure a *thank you* for her husband doing the dishes, or a smile for her daughter showing her artwork, or sincerity in her apology to her editor for

[27] Relatedly: my husband tells me that when I am writing poetry, I always look as if I am about to cry.
[28] Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (University of California Press, 1983), 5.

missing a deadline. I picture the writer-wife-mother-caretaker sitting down to her desk, her face going slack along with her prose.[29]

Christle has abandoned the lyric poem (and the intense emotion historically linked to it) for the lyric diary, an "ugly" form (non-narrative and uncategorizable) that uses "ugly," unemotional language (prose written with a flat affect). And her subject has changed accordingly: instead of examining herself, the traditional lyric subject, and the cause of her crying—instead of spinning a moving narrative for the reader—she has bypassed narrative altogether and turned the crying itself into an object of study. Christle is perhaps influenced here by an internalized sense of what Gillian White has called "lyric shame"—a shame experienced through "identification with modes of reading and writing understood to be lyric," and generated by avant-garde attacks on the lyric as conventional and sentimental.[30] The lyric diary thus represents an attempt to distance the self from the embarrassment of the lyric and the lyric "I," taking an outside object of study in place of the self—but onto which the self is projected throughout: crying, blue (*Bluets*), the diary (*Ongoingness*), the pillow (*A Pillow Book*), the dog (*The Friend*), the baby (*Little Labors*), winter/the weather (*Winter*), the playground (*Savage Park*), the art of translation (*The Little Art*), pop culture (*Screen Tests*), and so on. And yet this move is a traditionally lyric one—in

[29] I'm reminded here, especially in the context of Christle's work, of how whenever I'm writing, my husband says I look like I'm about to cry—is that my 'real' face, I wonder? Or maybe that's just the way my face looks in a moment of total catharsis and release. Or maybe, to rephrase Abe Lincoln's famous dictum, "I laugh because I must not cry," I write because I cannot cry?

[30] Gillian White, *Lyric Shame* (Harvard University Press, 2014), 2.

Hegel's Romantic conception of the lyric, "[t]he lyric poet absorbs into himself the external world and stamps it with inner consciousness, and the unity of the poem is provided by this subjectivity."[31] The lyric diary is ashamed to be a lyric, and so it elevates the "ugly" over the beautiful, the object over the subject, prose over poetry. And yet it is still, inescapably a lyric.

III. Terms: "Lyric" and "Diary"

The Lyric

The lyric diary inhabits a similar literary niche as the lyric poem. Like the lyric poem, the lyric diary is a short, non-narrative text in which a first-person speaker explores ideas. As I noted earlier, many of the authors of the lyric diary are themselves poets and a few of these books are published by poetry presses. One reviewer even explicitly says that they are reading some of the books I identify as lyric diaries as prose poems. What's more, the "diaristic" features of the lyric diary are formally very similar to the serial poem. The serial poem is a series of individual lyrics that are linked together in a book-length poem. The serial poem is seen as an infinite form that resists narrative and closure, using paratactic, combinatorial methods to create a web of connection—much like a diary, or the lyric diary.

In recent years, the term "lyric" and the lyric itself have been the subject of renewed critical attention and debate. Both Jonathan Culler and Virginia Jackson, though in disagreement about the usefulness of the category, have expanded the

[31] Culler, "Lyric, History, and Genre (2009)," 66.

boundaries of the lyric beyond its Romantic conception as the genre of the solitary expressive speaker, or the lyric as, in Wordsworth's famous formulation, "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings…emotion recollected in tranquility." In defining the lyric diary, I *do* deliberately invoke the term in its narrower, Romantic sense: the lyric as a short, personal, expressive utterance by an individual—the "lyric I." But I also think of it in relation to Culler's notion (via George Wright) of the "lyric present," which, in grammatical terms, is the use of the simple present tense even when not indicating habitual action, such as Yeats's line "I walk through the long schoolroom questioning."[32] Although the lyric diary is not written in the lyric present—it usually uses the simple past—its focus tends to rest, like the lyric's, on the moment of evocation of the event rather than on the event itself: it is primarily a mode of *telling* rather than *showing*.

A few of the lyric diaries I have identified frame their works within the lyric tense by using a conditional at, or near, the beginning of the work:

> Suppose I were to begin by saying that I had fallen in love with a color.[33]
>
> I suppose some people can weep softly and become more beautiful…[34]
>
> Or say the eyes are resting when the phone rings…[35]

[32] George T. Wright, "The Lyric Present: Simple Present Verbs in English Poems," *PMLA* 89, no. 3 (1974): 563–79.
[33] Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (Wave Books, 2009), 1.
[34] Christle, *The Crying Book*, 1.
[35] Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*, 8.

This conditional marks the work as operating in the subjunctive mode—as describing that which is not necessarily real. Of the relationship between the lyric present and the subjunctive, Wright says, "[T]he lyric present appears to offer as actual, conditions that we normally accept only as possible, special, figurative, provisional…The actions described seem filtered through imagination or memory."[36] The lyric present offers as actual things that we normally accept as subjunctive, whereas the lyric diary is offering as subjunctive things we normally accept as actual. The lyric diary is, paradoxically, evoking the lyric present through this reversal: framing the text within the subjunctive mood has the effect of rendering the actions described appear as if "filtered through imagination or memory." This intuitively makes sense to me: in order to appear more lyric—to cast a net of enchantment and estrangement over the reader—prose, and especially nonfictional prose, needs a touch of the subjunctive, while poetry, which already seems to belong half to the world of dreams, needs some reality—the indicative.

The use of the subjunctive also recalls the idea, put forth by Barbara Herrnstein Smith in "On the Margins of Discourse," of the lyric as a fictional representation of a personal utterance. In Smith's model, "it is as if every poem began, 'For example, I or someone might say…'"[37] A few of the texts I see as lyric diaries actually begin in this subjunctive, fictive manner—thus seeming to explicitly

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[36] Wright, "The Lyric Present," 569.
[37] Culler, "Lyric, History, and Genre," 71. The lyric diary conditionals also, like Smith's argument, echo Emily Dickinson's famous words, in an 1862 letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "When I state myself, as the representative of the verse, it does not mean me, but a supposed person."

frame their work in terms of the lyric.[38] Others, however, do this subjunctive framing through genre (by publishing the work as fiction like Jenny Offill, Sheila Heti, Sigrid Nunez) or through formal decisions (Jenny Boully writing the entire book in footnotes).

The lyric diary operates within a version of the lyric present in which the emphasis is on the moment of recollection—on the speaker's subjective experience of and in time (what we could call a kind of *psychic time* or *slow time*) rather than on historical (this *and* this *and* this *and* this) or plotted time (this *so* that). Through the use of vague temporal markers (one day, one afternoon, one year, sometimes) as well as on deictic ones (yesterday, tomorrow, now, later, after, last night), writers of the lyric diary create the strange effect of a text existing outside of time, untethered from sequence and consequence. In a typical such moment in *Little Labors*, Rivka Galchen writes, "I'm not sure which afternoon, just a bright one."[39] This kind of atemporal, perpetual present captures the state of the mind of the lyric diary's narrator, who, either because of new motherhood or grief or middle age or depression, feels increasingly lost in time. Galchen again: "[M]y life had become a day of unprecedented length."[40] It is as if the narrator now finds herself simply *being* in the present for the first time, and this feeling of being fully within time paradoxically

[38] All three of the lyric diary authors cited above—Nelson, Christle, Rankine—are not just poets but university professors. It is likely they are all familiar with critical discussions surrounding the lyric. Rankine, who has subtitled her book "A Lyric" and questions the lyric "I" throughout *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen*, seems to be most overtly engaging with contemporary lyric theory.
[39] Galchen, *Little Labors*, 13.
[40] Galchen, 8.

creates the sense of being outside it. After all, she is outside of it—at least outside of what we have to come to see as "normal" time: outside of institutional and corporate time, outside of "the focused, progressive, outcomes-based trajectory of 'normal' rational calendar workdays."[41] Or as Sarah Vap writes in "Oskar's Cars," "If before, my poems were lyric, outside of time or fixed place, then now my whole self is lyric. The world in which I live is outside of Time."[42]

The Diary

The diary, even more than the lyric, is defined by its relationship to time. A diary's main formal feature is that it is in and of time: each entry is dated. Further, the word "diary" derives from the Latin *diarum,* in turn from *dies,* "day." The diary is daily. But time in the diary is neither chronological—plans for the future join notes about today's weather or a childhood memory—nor plotted—the diarist might allot only one sentence to the "plot" of her life (like a significant milestone), while devoting paragraphs to a single look—a look that would otherwise have simply disappeared into oblivion, along with nearly every other forgettable moment of every other ordinary day. The diary is thus a way of not only recording, but also of making something (the diary itself) from the trivial, in-between, unproductive "waste" of the day. For many women (for, starting in the twentieth century, diaries had come to be written primarily by women[43]) that "waste" often takes the form of reproductive

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[41] Alison Bartlett, "Babydaze: Maternal Time," *Time & Society* 19, no. 1 (2010): 121.
[42] Sarah Vap, "Oskar's Cars," *Blackbird* 8, no. 2 (Fall 2009), https://blackbird.vcu.edu/v8n2/nonfiction/vap_s/oskar_page.shtml.
[43] Margo Culley, "'I Look at Me': Self as Subject in the Diaries of American Women," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 17, no. 3/4 (1989): 15.

labor, the "work that you have to do over and over again, work that seems to erase itself": cleaning, cooking, shopping, bearing and rearing children, caring for the elderly, managing the household social plans and calendar.[44] In this way, the diary, like my manuscript "Personal Statement," represents an attempt to turn work into *work.*

While there was a strong diary tradition in England, this diary was not private or personal but rather a public, often satirical, chronicle of the times—examples include the diaries of Samuel Pepys and Fanny Burney. The antecedent for the private diary, of the kind I am referring to throughout, is the *journal intime*, which emerged in France in the early 19th century as a wholly private mode of writing. An early French novelist, Benjamin Constant, even kept his diary in code—it was truly secret.[45] During this time, women were encouraged to keep a diary. Since it was private, it was non-literary, non-productive, and so viewed as a harmless occupation—so long as it didn't "interfere with the business of being a woman."[46]

By the mid-19th century, notebooks had become a popular gift for adolescent girls, who were the primary keepers of diaries. Girls kept a diary during the transitional period when they were moving from girlhood to womanhood.[47] The diary stopped when they got married however, because at that point it was seen as a self-

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[44] Jordan Kisner, "The Lockdown Showed How the Economy Exploits Women. She Already Knew.," *The New York Times*, February 17, 2021, sec. Magazine, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/17/magazine/waged-housework.html.
[45] Raoul, "Women and Diaries," 57–58.
[46] Dale Spender, *Man-Made Language* (London: Routledge, 1980), 194.
[47] Raoul, "Women and Diaries," 58.

indulgence—time that should be spent on others. In its typical form, the diary thus records a transitional period of growth and ideally ends with social integration—marriage, children—of the author.

I want to pause here to note that the lyric diary, however, is a genre of middle age. In contrast to the traditional *journal intime* which was kept by girls before they became wives and mothers, the lyric diary is written by women who are wives and mothers, or who are simply older and not just "starting out." So, it seems like these contemporary writers are reclaiming the diary for the adult woman while also questioning the very idea of beginnings and of endings. The traditional diary ends when the writer "settles down"; things are "settled." But, for the lyric diarist, things are absolutely not settled after marriage or kids—there absolutely is an "after" and it is not only not very happy, it, like adolescence, is still a time of confusion and change. In the postpartum period, women undergo a biological process comparable to adolescence: emotions and hormones are changing, emotions can be volatile, and one is forced to come to terms with a changed/changing body.[48] Just as the adolescent girl is facing her transition to womanhood, so the adult woman is figuring out the transition from woman to wife and/or mother, or from young woman to older woman, from object *and* subject to a kind of invisible background. Manguso: "The mother becomes the background against which the baby lives."[49]

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[48] Aurélie Athan and Heather L Reel, "Maternal Psychology: Reflections on the 20th Anniversary of Deconstructing Developmental Psychology," *Feminism & Psychology* 25, no. 3 (August 1, 2015): 311–25, https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353514562804.
[49] Manguso, *Ongoingness*, 53.

Formally, the lyric diary is very close to the diary. The diary is characterized primarily by the absence of any controlling authorial vision, which places it in opposition to our traditional understanding of literature. Because of the absence of the author, it is a text given to repetition, lacunae, a lack of plot or sustained and developed characters, ellipses, rhetorical questions, exclamations, parentheticals, very short or meandering sentences, abrupt endings, interruptions, and gaps—from erasure or torn pages or simply the author's time away from the journal. It is episodic and ongoing. It tells rather than shows. There is no need to "explain," "describe," or set "the scene" since what is being written is ostensibly for the self alone; shorthand will do. Its concerns are domestic. It is written in discrete entries that are themselves a series of disconnected thoughts, since a diarist does not often or always record a day as a narrative, moving from morning to night, but rather as a random collection of thoughts, notes, feelings, impressions, actions.

At its core, the lyric diary is a highly stylized and polished version of the private diary—a text carefully constructed to seem as if it "happened." Toward the end of his life, Roland Barthes mostly condemned the diary before concluding, "I can rescue the Journal on the one condition that I labor it *to death*, to the end of an extreme exhaustion, like a *virtually* impossible Text: a labor at whose end it is indeed possible that the Journal thus kept no longer resembles a Journal at all."[50] This is precisely what the lyric diary is: a diary that has been labored on—worked over, perfected—to such an extent it (almost) "no longer resembles a Journal." Thus, the

[50] Roland Barthes, *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (Macmillan, 1982), 495.

lyric diary adopts the form (fragmentary, non-narrative, associative), the modes (the list, the record, the quotation, the insight, the complaint, among others), the irresolution about beginnings and endings (opening *in media res* and ending abruptly, without closure), and many of the concerns of the private diary (the personal, the domestic, the family), but not the expansive, loose, or casual prose style. The lyric diary is a distillation of the private diary—a distillation that Sarah Manguso's *Ongoingness*, a memoir that discusses the writer's enormous, exhaustive diary without showing us any of the actual diary, literalizes. This is partly why the lyric modifier is so important: a poem is perhaps the most intentional, the most controlled of literary texts—or at least the most compressed and the most complex on the level of the word and the line. So, the lyric diary takes poetry's condensation and precision of language and combines it with some of the formal and stylistic features of the diary.

The Lyric Essay

Finally, a word about the lyric essay. The lyric diary, of course, owes a debt to John D'Agata's lyric essay. Like the lyric essay, the lyric diary writes "in-between the two worlds of poetry and essay" and eschews "the story-driven ambitions of fiction and nonfiction for the associative inquiry of poems."[51] However, it is not primarily an essay—an assay, an *essai*, an attempt, Samuel Johnson's "loose sally of the mind"—but a diary—a record. Some of the books that I categorize as lyric diaries could certainly be categorized as lyric essays. But I believe that to read them in

[51] D'Agata, *We Might As Well Call It the Lyric Essay,* 6–7.

relation to the diary, a private mode of writing historically practiced predominantly by women, as opposed to that of the essay, a public mode of writing historically practiced predominantly by men, activates new "aspects of the works that make them rich, dynamic, and revealing."[52]

Although, like a diary, the lyric diary could go on indefinitely, shred after shred, it tends to end as quietly and as quickly as it began. In this way, the form captures what Manguso describes as life's ongoingness—a sense of being forever in the middle, with no beginnings and no ends. Perhaps because of this, the lyric diary often feels not-quite-finished, like an outline or a series of notes. Or, rather, like it was never meant to be "finished"—like a diary.

IV. An Atmosphere of Glass: Understanding the Lyric Diary through Anne Carson's "The Glass Essay"

In this section, I want to read the word "glass" in Anne Carson's famous piece (do we call it a poem? an essay? a short story?) "The Glass Essay."[53] I almost called the "lyric diary," the "glass essay" for I see "The Glass Essay" as a kind of ur-lyric diary: it is a fragmented, genre-bending narrative written from the point of view of a depressed female speaker in the middle of her life who has taken up Emily Brontë and *Wuthering Heights* as her outside objects of study. The "essay" is peppered with

[52] Culler, "Lyric, History, and Genre (2009)," 66.
[53] "The Glass Essay" appears in full in Anne Carson's book *Glass, Irony, and God*; however, it also appears in full online at The Poetry Foundation. I was referring back to the digital version of the text throughout and so have not included page numbers. Here is the full citation: Anne Carson, "The Glass Essay," The Poetry Foundation, 1994, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48636/the-glass-essay.

quotations and even long passages from Brontë's fiction and poetry. Its setting is domestic: after a bad break-up from her boyfriend Law, the speaker is living at home with her mother, and they frequently appear in the kitchen together, doing little:

> Mother and I are chewing lettuce carefully.
> The kitchen wall clock emits a ragged low buzz that jumps
>
> once a minute over the twelve.

The speaker's affect is generally flat and the sentence structure, simple—for the most part. However, when the images do grow wild, dramatic, the speaker seems to grow embarrassed, excuses herself—

> It pains me to record this,
>
> I am not a melodramatic person.

In this moment, Carson expresses a fear that seems to run beneath the glass-like (smooth, cool, clear) prose of the lyric diary: a fear of being perceived as melodramatic at best, hysterical at worst. This fear suggests that the woman writing about depression or sadness must write clearly, cogently, without affect—or run the risk of being accused of doing *too much*: she's overreacting, overrunning, overreaching, overindulging, overdoing it. Instead, she writes of herself as if from the perspective of another (Maggie Nelson's "supposed person"), as if it's nothing personal.

The word "glass" only appears four times throughout Anne Carson's 36-page work (which I will resist the urge to call a poem), "The Glass Essay," but to read the piece is to feel oneself, to use Carson's words, "lowered in an atmosphere of glass."

What is an "atmosphere of glass"? Glass is unyielding, fragile, reflective yet also transparent, brittle, sharp; the atmosphere in the speaker's house, as evident in the nearly wordless interactions between the speaker and her taciturn, often-critical mother, is certainly all of those things. The phrase also contains overtones of Sylvia Plath's bell jar: "Wherever I sat—on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok—I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air."[54] To be "under glass," as in the case of a bell jar, is to be kept separate from the world on the pretext of protection—from air, light, physical handling. Objects placed under glass—paintings, photographs, pinned insects, precious artifacts—are delicate; they are only intended to be examined and observed, not interacted with, not moved or touched. To be "under glass" is to be an object available for viewing. Plath used the metaphor of the bell jar as a metaphor for her character's (and her own) experience of depression: the image of the bell jar evokes intense claustrophobia and suffocation as well as a sense of being separate from the world, of feeling herself to be an object, perhaps even already dead (to be dead is also to become an object: the body).

The suffocating stillness and stuckness of the "atmosphere of glass" is evident in the language as well: the word *glass*, derived from the Old English *glaes*, is related

[54] Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (Harper Collins, 1963/2005), 188.

to the Latin word for amber, *glaesum*. Amber is a translucent, glass-like material famous for suffocating then entombing insects, 'stopping' time by preserving them intact while also rendering them objects. Because of this, amber, in addition to being a decorative stone often set in jewelry, is a fossil and thus a symbol of time. Glass, too, is a symbol of time, in the form of an hourglass, and, more recently, in the glass we find on watch and smartphone faces. The hourglass and the watch are devices used to measure time; a fossil serves a similar purpose, albeit for time on a much larger scale. The fossil, however, preserves time, stopping it in its place (much like a memory), whereas, beneath glass, time simply slips away, ticks by. In an "atmosphere of glass," time becomes visible, material, like the sand that runs through the hourglass—"it is the light of the stalled time after lunch / when clocks tick," or:

> It is as if we have all been lowered in an atmosphere of glass.
> Now and then a remark trails through the glass.

At first reading, that a remark "trails through the glass" appears strange; after all, glass is a rigid substance. Once it is set, nothing can move, much less "trail," through it. But with the resonance of the hourglass mentioned above, the line changes: a remark, which happens in and takes up time, can be seen as a piece of time itself—some sand, you could say, trailing through the glass or a small insect moving through the viscous substance of sap before it hardens into a fossil.

Given *glass*'s association with amber and with time, the title, "The Glass Essay," seems to speak to a desire to "fossilize" the memories within, to entomb them in the writing. I don't see this as coming from a desire to preserve the feelings so

much as a desire to turn them into an object—by putting them into amber or "under glass"—and then to hurl that object—the book—away: "when I write, all of what I write, once it is written, it is forgotten."[55] The lyric diary, thus, as an attempt to externalize and so expunge, exterminate, exorcize the bad feelings—to write, paradoxically, to forget: Now I consider the diary a compilation of moments I'll forget… My goal now is to forget it all so that I'm clean for death."[56]

Yet there is another way to read Carson's two lines. The French word for glass, *glace*, also means *mirror*; in English, *glass* can serve as a metonym for *mirror*, or an abbreviation of *looking glass*. Thus, to be "lowered in an atmosphere of glass" might also be to go through the looking glass—and to be stuck there, on the wrong side of it, where the world is strange, and where, "now and then," a remark is able to trail through from the other side. The words "through the glass" also inevitably bring to mind the Biblical phrase from 1 Corinthians 13:12: "For now we see through a glass, darkly…" To see "through a glass, darkly" is to see the world, and reality, from an incomplete or distorted perspective. Thus, to be in an "atmosphere of glass," receiving the occasional remark "through the glass" is to see and receive the world not as it is but as it seems. The mind of the depressed speaker is itself a mirror that distorts.

"The Glass Essay" it opens with a mirror:

My face in the bathroom mirror
has white streaks down it.

[55] Hervé Guibert quoted in Zambreno, 114.
[56] Manguso, 86.

I rinse the face and return to bed.

In this stanza, the speaker seems strangely disassociated from herself; instead of writing, "I have white streaks down my face," she gives subject-hood over to the face itself ("My face…has white streaks"). In the final sentence, the "I" returns but rinses "the face." Replacing the possessive adjective "my" with the article "the" implies that the "I" no longer feels she can claim possession of the face, that it is somehow separate. This, combined with the fact that the face is only seen through the mediating object of the bathroom mirror, imparts the impression that the speaker is divided, that her face continues to exist in the mirror—or "through the glass"—while the "I" returns to bed. The glass both multiplies and divides.

I am thinking here of how there are no mirrors in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*: the speaker is constantly looking into the glass of the television screen instead, becoming what she sees: depressed because the commercials for medication tell her she is, as-if-dead because of all the reported deaths and because everyone in the old movies she watches is already dead. The glass at once divides her—or at least her attention, which is now divided between herself and the urgency of the latest news item—and multiplies her—her "self" expands into the plural; she is part of a larger audience, the American public, all watching the news and following the stories together: as the speaker says, while "I, or we, it hardly matters, seek out the story in the *Times*."[57] In this way, the lyric diary often enacts the "split focus" Ann Cvetkovich associates with

[57] Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*, 67.

the "lived experience of race and class divisions," though often with a focus on the experience of gender divisions.[58]

Aside from the title, the word "glass" only appears four times throughout "The Glass Essay," but the essay is full of other types of glass: eleven windows, one mirror, one switched-off TV screen, one icicle, some frost, a bit of water, and so much ice.

In "The Glass Essay," ice and glass are interchangeable, and looking closely at the linguistic and material properties of both expands our understanding of the text. Linguistically, *glass* is related to *glacial*, which comes from the French *glace* (which translates not only as *glass* and *mirror* but also as *ice*). It is also close to *glaze*, to coating or covering with a smooth, shiny finish, and all are likely related to the Latin *gelāre*, to freeze, which is the root for *gelid* (extremely cold) and *geal* (to stiffen with cold or congeal). On the material aspect, ice, like glass, is unyielding, fragile, reflective, brittle, transparent, sharp. And glass, like ice, is a kind of frozen liquid: it is produced by melting sand into liquid, mixing it with limestone and soda ash, then letting it cool—but no matter how long you cool the sand, it never fully sets into a solid. Instead, it remains what scientists call an amorphous solid: a cross between a solid and a liquid which contains the crystalline order of a solid and the molecular randomness of a liquid—a perfect description for the form of the lyric diary, which combines the crystalline order of the lyric with the randomness of a diary.

[58] Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 2.

Glass is like ice in many ways, but also like fire: to create glass requires heating quartz sand to extraordinary temperatures—about 1500 degrees Fahrenheit, or at about seven times the boiling point of water. It is molten before taking its shape; thus, man-made glass is a product of heat. But glass's connection to fire is even more evident in the case of obsidian—the dark, volcanic glass is naturally created from the rapidly-cooling lava. In the case of obsidian, glass is not simply the product but the evidence of the volcanic eruption: it's what remains long after the actual explosion. Glass is heat—anger—congealed. The "glass" in "The Glass Essay" thus suggests that the essay itself is a kind of congealed rage: evidence of a volcanic explosion.

In "The Glass Essay," Carson—who has painted volcanoes, in addition to giving them central roles in *Autobiography of Red* and its follow-up, *Red Doc>*—directly references a volcano once: "The volcano in the Philippines at it again," her mother says one morning over breakfast. So, throughout the action of the essay, this volcano on the other side of the world is "at it again." The erupting volcano is thus a kind of backdrop for the whole wintry scene, suggestive of the bright, fiery emotions hiding beneath (or within) the speaker's icy façade.

The following passage contains an image that further underscores, and makes concrete, the metaphor of ice as congealed anger:

> I have reached the middle
>
> where the ground goes down into a depression and fills with swampy water.
> It is frozen.
> A solid black pane of moor life caught in its own night attitudes.
>
> Certain wild gold arrangements of weed are visible deep in the black.

The speaker keeps returning to the "middle" of the moor. The middle, a figure for the speaker's emotional and physical, middle-aged state, is also the lowest part of the moor: "the ground goes down into a depression." The use of the word "depression" here is subtle and brilliant—it is both descriptive of the landscape, and also metaphorical of the speaker's internal landscape. In this depression filled with "swampy" water—water that's dark, muddy, or brackish (nothing here is clear or clean)—the speaker finds "a solid black pane." Significantly, the ice is called a "pane," a sheet of glass used in a window or door (and a word which also evokes its homonym: *pain*). If we substitute the definition of "pane" for the word, we can see the ice is being described as "a solid black sheet of glass": black glass is obsidian.

Surprisingly, in this monochrome landscape, we have color here, and not just any color, but that of the most precious metal—gold. Figuratively, gold is associated with brilliance, beauty, nobility, and kindness; to have a "heart of gold" is to be generous and good. So, we could read this passage as what is gold/good in life and within the speaker is stuck within the ice, inaccessible until spring and the thaw.[59] And yet with the volcano "at it again" in the background of the text, the black pane/obsidian also suggests that the "*wild* gold arrangements of weed"—weed, that which is wild, unwanted, ugly—could also be figures for anger, passion, or other

[59] Interestingly, "thaw," a word that never appears in the text, rhymes with Law, the name of the speaker's ex-lover. The absence of "thaw" is felt in its absence despite the fact that the "aw" sound echoes throughout the text (Dr. Haw, Law, draw, saw, Earnshaw, gnaw, claw, paws, awful, dawn, etc.).

similarly fiery emotions that the speaker has suppressed yet not successfully extinguished—they are still present, only dormant.

Psychoanalytic theorists, building upon the groundwork Freud set down in *Mourning and Melancholia*, have long conceptualized depression as suppressed anger that is turned inward, against the self. Despite the efforts of the feminist movement, girls are still raised in ways that restrict their ability to express anger in addition to continuing to face strong social prohibitions against expressing anger as adults. And, as confirmation of the psychoanalytic theory, studies and surveys consistently find that women are more likely to experience depression than men. [60] Thus, in writing about depression, the lyric diarist is also writing of suppressed anger—a portrait of the "solid black pane" with the "wild gold arrangements" barely visible "deep in the black."

"Did something happen?" he asks kindly after a moment.

"Yes," I explain.[61]

And yet the suppression of the anger in the lyric diary has utility: it is a way of being heard. The narrators of the lyric diary are women who may have once been called hysterical—they are teetering on an edge, close to losing it. Though they may be 'crazy', their writing remains cool, collected, calm—almost eerily so.

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[60] Sylvia Wen-Hsin Chen, "Anger Suppression and Depressive Symptoms among Chinese Women in the United States [Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation]" (Texas A&M University, 2008), 9.
[61] Offill, *Dept. of Speculation*, 50–51.

Glass is a contradiction. It's used to protect us and yet it shatters with a hard blow. It's made from rock yet it's transparent. It's fragile and brittle yet tough enough for staircases, walls, and roofs. It appears to be a solid, but it's also a kind of a liquid. It makes up the most basic and essential of objects (lightbulbs, car windows) as well as the most ornamental (cut glass, stained glass, glass figurines). It is that into which we look (a mirror or an eye) and that through which we look (a window or a pair of glasses). It can be domestic and clear (the glass out of which I'm drinking water) and opaque and wild (obsidian). White (ice) or black (obsidian). It is the perfect descriptor for the word "essay"—a form that is simultaneously seen as prosaic and essential (the newspaper article, the op-ed, the high school exercise) and also ornamental (the personal or lyric essays), one that we look through as often as we look at, one that tends to defy genre in a way that frustrates classifiers. The essay refuses, much like glass, to be either fully solid or fully liquid.

To modify "essay" with "glass" as Carson has, however, is not only to emphasize the glass-like nature of the essay as a form, but to call attention to the particularly glass-like, and also *feminine,* nature of *this* essay, "The Glass Essay." This essay, which cycles through the same scenes (in the kitchen, on the moors, between remembered visions of "nudes"), is static and stuck. It is brittle: its prose has shattered across the page into lines, its paragraphs, into stanzas. It is reflective: the speaker sees herself duplicated not only in Emily Brontë, whom she fears becoming, but in her mother. The glass both multiplies and divides. The essay is cold: it has not been written during the heat of a fiery passion but in the cold afterward of heartbreak

and depression. And yet it is also hot: like glass, it was forged through fire. With Law, the speaker was molten; now, she's glass. With Law, the essay would have been a poem; without him, it has cooled into an amorphous liquid.

It is interesting to pair "glass" with "essay," because the essay is often defined as something that is, or appears, incomplete—as a rehearsal, an endeavor, a first attempt, a rough draft, "an irregular undigested piece" (Samuel Johnson). To qualify it as glass, however, is to willfully associate the essay with a certain, higher level of finish (with "polish") that it has historically been described as lacking, and with a certain amount of preciousness and fragility too (as with a glass figurine). Carson might be using the title with some self-awareness and irony, pointing lightly to the contemporary personal essay as a form where fragility is often performed—and often betrayed as performative by the degree to which the text is polished.

Finally, to call it "The Glass Essay" is also, perhaps, a request to the reader to see through the form, rather than to stare at it—a paradoxical request to ignore the form at the same time as Carson is drawing attention to it. Or, alternatively, it could be an invitation for the reader to see herself within the (looking) glass that is the essay. Either way, the title calls attention to its own tension, to the fact that it represents both that which is looked at as well as that which is looked through. I have tried to capture this tension in my own term, lyric diary: the "lyric" being a form that invites looking, and the diary, a form that is generally looked through, that is seen as formless.

V. Toward a conclusion

Nearly all the lyric diaries I identify are written by white women, and only a handful of the lyric diaries I've discussed engage directly with politics (Nelson, Rankine, Vap). Mostly, the lyric diary faces inward, toward the self, rather than outward, toward the world, and so appears to be apolitical. However, I have already discussed many of the ways I see the lyric diary as an inherently feminist text and in this section, will discuss other ways in which it engages in a larger cultural critique.

I see the lyric diary as a politically significant text by white women, as it marks a refusal to engage in the kind of white female vulnerability and victimhood that has historically provoked white men into acts of racial violence on their behalf. The women in these texts are often crying—they're sad, depressed—and yet they're not asking for help or for pity. In fact, through the genre's formal features (flat affect, fragmentation, lack of detail, note-like nature of the writing, etc.), the lyric diarist is actually holding the reader at a distance, so that though the reader sees her tears, they do not experience the writer's sadness in the same way as they would in the more traditional, novelistic memoir form. The lyric diarist *tells* about her pain rather than *showing* it.

In the case of a Black woman writing into the genre, such as Rankine in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* or Chet'la Sebree's *Field Study*, the genre's cool, collected mode becomes even more significant as a refusal to inhabit the stereotype of the angry Black woman. However, given the potential relationship between repressed anger and depression, it is likely that the speaker's efforts to remain cool and collected are

contributing to her depression—a fact that underscores the idea that the lyric diarist's depression is not "personal," it is what Cvetkovich calls a "political depression."[62]

The lyric diarist is not pointing fingers. There is no single person to blame for her sadness—it arises from the condition of living in a neoliberal, patriarchal, racially, and economically divided society. Or simply: from the condition of living in a divided society. Ultimately, sadness arises from being lonely—social isolation being perhaps the most characteristic cultural marker of our time, especially in a post-pandemic world.[63] As Britney Spears sang presciently in 1999, "My loneliness is killing me": studies have shown loneliness is as likely to cause early death as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day and is twice as deadly as obesity. Further, when social connections are weak or severed, rates of dementia, hypertension, and alcoholism rise alongside depression, anxiety, and suicide.[64] The loneliness of the lyric diarist is not just her loneliness but our loneliness, not just her depression, but ours too. Don't let me be lonely: don't let me die of loneliness.

The lyric diarist generally writes other narratives of pain alongside her own: Nelson writing of the recovery of her friend (Christina Crosby) from a biking accident that left her paralyzed (*Bluets*), Zambreno writing about Hervé Guibert's slow death from AIDS (*To Write as if Already Dead*), Rankine writing about many other narratives of death—close friends and relatives dying alongside strangers she

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[62] Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Duke University Press, 2012), 1.
[63] George Monbiot, "The Age of Loneliness Is Killing Us," *The Guardian*, accessed September 23, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/14/age-of-loneliness-killing-us.
[64] Monbiot.

reads about in the paper. Notably, the pain that the lyric diarist usually explores in the sub-narratives are of physical pain and illness rather than mental pain or illness. By exploring her own invisible, mental anguish alongside others' visible physical suffering, the lyric diarist simultaneously seems to question its validity—what is her pain compared to Guibert's?—and also establish an equivalence between depression and any other physical condition or illness—it too can cause physical pain and even death.

At the same time, the lyric diary is also an attempt to take the narrative of depression back from the pharmaceutical companies, to depathologize it—to humanize, domesticate, normalize it. As Cvetkovich observes, "[many bestsellers] make depression seem so clinical, so extreme, so pathological, so alien"; her goal in the memoir section of her book is to render depression as "ordinary bad feelings"—as sadness.[65] Rankine's speaker never says she is depressed; instead: "I felt sad." She is prescribed antidepressants but they don't work, and she stops taking them.[66] As the French cartoonist Emma Clit writes in her comic "Holidays," about her maternity leave, "To blame the depression of a young mother on her hormones is very convenient. It makes it a 'normal' state with a scientific explanation."[67] The same could be said about depression outside of the postpartum period—to blame

[65] Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 16.
[66] Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*, 108.
[67] Emma Clit, "Holidays," *Emma* (blog), June 4, 2017, https://english.emmaclit.com/2017/06/04/holidays/.

depression on a chemical imbalance is "convenient" and it pathologizes what could otherwise be "ordinary bad feelings" and sadness.

What is at stake for women in the lyric diary is our capacity to feel bad/sad. After puberty, every bad feeling a woman experiences can be attributed to hormone shifts due to PMS, pregnancy and postpartum, breastfeeding, perimenopause, post-menopause; because of this, her feelings aren't seen as authentic but as arising from a physiological state. Yes, hormones play a role in creating feelings and moods, but so do other material and physical states—whether one is hungry, thirsty, sick, or sleep-deprived, to name just a few. (Christle addresses this in *The Crying Book*: "People cry out of fatigue. But how horrible it is to hear, 'She's just tired!' Tired, yes, certainly, but *just*? There is nothing just about it."[68]) And while it's common to attribute female moods to hormonal changes (and make jokes and memes about it), the larger culture rarely discusses the fact that men also experience hormonal shifts over the course of their life—namely, a gradual decline in testosterone levels, which naturally also has an impact on mood.

To attribute all women's bad emotions to hormones is to belittle and dismiss them as well as the conditions that are giving rise to her bad emotions. It is much easier, much more "convenient" for husbands, male politicians, and even for many women to roll their eyes and mutter "PMS" than to look closely at the reasons for those bad feelings—at the lack of strong infrastructure for mothers and those performing eldercare, at the unequal mental loads, at the division of domestic labor, at

[68] Christle, 4.

the culture that raises women to swallow their anger and resentment in order to please others. It is much easier and convenient to act as if women do not have an actual reason to feel bad, to tell them their sadness is actually caused by hormonal or chemical imbalances that can be treated with a pill than by social and economic imbalances that will take years to change.

The lyric diary represents an attempt to take back the narrative of female sadness from doctors, therapists, pharmaceutical companies and also popular culture, more generally through content (writing about sadness and other 'bad' feelings) as well as form. Through her flat writing style, the lyric diarist shows that her emotions are separate from her, that they don't define or determine or cloud her ability to think. That she can have moods and bouts of irritability and other bad feelings and also think (and write) clearly, objectively, and analytically. That it is normal and acceptable to feel bad—to cry, to weep, to sob, even if (even though?) it means becoming, in Christle's words, "hideous."[69]

[69] Christle, 1.

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An Interlude—"A Lovely Woman Tapers Off Into a Fish": Monstrosity in Montaigne's *Essais*

Montaigne would have us think of his book, and therefore his mind, as monstrous: "I have seen no more evident monstrosity and miracle in the world than myself" (III.11, 958). And "I find that…like a runaway horse, [the mind] gives itself a hundred times more trouble than it took for others, and gives birth to so many chimeras and fantastic monsters, one after another, without order or purpose" (I.8, 25). And elsewhere: "And what are these things of mine, in truth, but grotesques and monstrous bodies, pieced together of divers members, without definite shape, having no order, sequence, or proportion other than accidental?" (II.28, 165).

The collected *Essais*, bound in a single enormous volume and printed on tissue-thin paper, is, well, a monster of a book. Even with a table of contents and a numbering system to make the text easier to navigate, it is nearly impossible to do so. The attentive reader is constantly flipping backward and forward, trying to find a specific essay, page, or sentence, to retroactively trace a line of thought. That the titles of the essays often correspond little to the content therein makes this even more difficult: In "De l'expérience," Montaigne expends the first few pages on a lengthy discussion of the French legal system; in "Des boyteux," he discusses the French calendar, rumors, miracles, and sorcery before, in the essay's final few paragraphs, getting to the "boyteux" of the title. It is difficult to navigate even *within* single essays, especially as they swell in size. Montaigne's arguments are circular, repetitive, digressive, rhizomatic, oblique, even paratactical. He does not hold the

reader's hand: "I love the poetic gait, by leaps and gambols…It is the inattentive reader who loses my subject, not I" (III.9, 925).

This monstrosity is especially evident to scholars of Montaigne. While reading critical articles, I noticed the lack of a uniform citation method for the *Essais*. Some scholars provide just the page numbers, others (much more helpfully!) the section and essay numbers along with a page number; some provide dual French/English citations—though, it seems, others' editions are never quite the same as my own. It is rare, it seems, for scholars to provide the titles of the essays. To find a quotation I had seen quoted elsewhere from a Montaigne essay I had not yet read, I had to read the whole essay. There is no way through the essays but… through. Montaigne derided the scholar: "It is more of a job to interpret the interpretations than to interpret the things, and there are more books about books than about any other subject: we do nothing but write glosses about each other" (III.13, 996). So, it is fitting that he has created a text that almost successfully evades such glosses.

But the monstrosity of the text extends far beyond its materiality. In the same way that mainstream culture has come to conflate Victor Frankenstein with his monster—so that many who have not read Mary Shelley's novel believe Frankenstein to *be* the monster—we similarly have come to conflate Montaigne-the-person with Montaigne-the-text, even though, "[t]he narrative self depicted by the writer can never be construed as self-identical" (Kritzman 8). The text of the *Essais* has eclipsed and replaced the actual person of Montaigne just as Victor Frankenstein's monster destroyed and then, in public imagination, replaced his creator. Like the monster, who

lives on (presumably indefinitely) after Frankenstein's death, so Montaigne's book "continues to live on and have a life of its own" (Kritzman 7). The same could be said of children and grandchildren: over time, one's descendants—who are not identical but rather "like"—eclipse and eventually replace the aging, dying, dead parent. As the monster's creator, Victor Frankenstein is both father and mother to it; likewise is Montaigne both father and mother to the "chimeras and fantastic monsters" his mind has "birthed." The *Essais* are thus fashioned as a kind of "enfant monstrueux" (a titular phrase of an essay I will discuss in a later section)—a male child, a son, born unnaturally, of one man, alone.

I. The Monster

When Montaigne was writing, the monster and the child were inextricably linked. According to Ambroise Paré, the barber surgeon whose book *Des Monstres et Prodiges* (1573) Montaigne read: "Monsters are things that appear outside the course of Nature…such as a child who is born with one arm" (3). In other words, the Renaissance "monster" was a child born with what we would understand today as a birth defect or disability (Hampton 17). Because of these disabilities, the "monster" rarely lived to adulthood: its image was therefore of the perpetual child.

Monsters were usually understood as having been created in the womb. Although Paré's "causes of monsters" ranged from too great or too little "a quantity of seed," "the glory of God," and the size of the womb, the most prevalent and most widely discussed theory regarding their creation was that of the maternal imagination. Under this theory, it was believed that so-called monsters could be formed as a result

of the mother's exposure to certain images during her pregnancy (Huet 5). Or, as Montaigne writes in "De la force de l'imagination":

> Nevertheless, we know by experience that women transmit marks of their fancies to the bodies of the children they carry in their womb… [T]here was presented to Charles, king of Bohemia and Emperor, a girl from near Pisa, all hairy and bristly, who her mother said had been thus conceived because of a picture of Saint John the Baptist hanging by her bed. (I.21, 82)

The monster was thus understood, quite literally, to be a product of the female imagination, and it was monstrous in part because it bore resemblance to an external image rather than to the father: like had not begotten like. In this way, a monstrous birth was seen as publicly revealing the mother's shameful, sometimes illegitimate desires (Huet 17). While an artist creates with intentionality, usually with the goal of making an object of beauty, the mother, by contrast, has no control over her creation. The monstrous creation, thus, "does not mislead, [but] reveals…It expose[s] the shameful source of its deformity, its useless and inappropriate model"—its creator, the mother (Huet 26).

This language sounds familiar. Montaigne's *Essais*, "fantastic monsters" which he—by his own analogy—"birthed" expose "the shameful source" of their deformity, their "useless and inappropriate model": Montaigne himself. The famous passage from "De l'oisiveté," quoted earlier, reads in full:

> But I find that… like a runaway horse, [the mind] gives itself a hundred times more trouble than it took for others, and *gives birth to so many chimeras and*

> *fantastic monsters*, one after another, without order or purpose that in order to contemplate their ineptitude and strangeness at my pleasure, I have begun to put them in writing, *hoping in time to make my mind ashamed of itself*. (emphasis my own; I.8, 25)

In this moment, Montaigne acknowledges the shameful secrets ("chimeras and fantastic monsters")—admissions, desires, weaknesses, obsessions, pains—made public via his text, in addition to confessing his own lack of control over his mind/imagination ("like a runaway horse") and consequently the text. Thus, Montaigne does not present himself as the conventional male artist working deliberately to craft a beautiful, symmetrical object but as a mother-artist, incapable of choice or discrimination, giving birth to "fantastic monsters" from his out-of-control, overabundant, and so female, imagination. Without this imagination, there would be no *Essais*. For, in birthing these monsters of the mind, Montaigne is also giving birth to himself as a writer, to his text, and to the essay as form; without the monstrous thoughts, there would have been no urge to write (Regosin 156). Neither does Montaigne present himself as a penitent, seeking to confess and repent for these shameful thoughts. Instead, he is an essayist: a passive observer of and witness to his own monstrous thoughts and monstrous nature (Regosin 155).

II. The Child

Of the six daughters Montaigne's wife, Françoise de la Cassaigne, carried to term, only one, Léonor, survived to adulthood. He had no sons in the era of primogeniture and the Salic law, which excluded women as well as any men who derived their right

to inheritance from the female line from inheriting the throne. Only a son, through inheritance of name, title, position, and land, could truly (and legally) act as a representative for and of the father; only a son could produce 'true' descendants, could pass on the family name, could help Montaigne live on after death.

Though Montaigne mentions his missing son several times across the essays, he discusses his surviving daughter only twice across the entire book, and names her only once: "they all die on me at nurse; but Léonor, one single daughter who escaped that misfortune…" (II.8, 341). This moment is grammatically striking because of his use of the present tense: "they all *die* on me at nurse" (*Ils me meurent tous en nourrisse* [F60]). In French, as in English, the present tense has many functions, and more than one resonates here: the *présent continu* (continuous present), used to describe an ongoing, unfinished action, e.g. "They *are* all *dying* on me at nurse"; *présent de vérité générale* (the present of universal truth), as in "The sky is blue" or here, "All my children die in infancy"; *présent de narration* (the present of narration), used to create a sense of immediacy when telling a story about past events; and the *présent d'habitude* (habitual action), which, as in English, relates repeated or regular actions—"My children keep dying." In any of these uses, Montaigne's choice of the present tense reads as evidence of an unhealed emotional trauma; the action of his infant daughters' "dying" cannot yet be considered a past action.

Two things perhaps amplified the pain Montaigne felt at his daughters' deaths: their sex and the brevity of their lives, both of which suggested a weakness or lack on the side of the father. In the Renaissance, the figure of the woman was seen as

a kind of monster since it deviated from the 'neutral' and 'normal' male body (Huet 3). Montaigne's five dead daughters were all 'deformed' by virtue of their sex—by virtue of the fact that they took more after their mother than their father, a signal that her imagination overpowered his own. And, they were, like the Renaissance monsters, perpetual children: they did not get to grow up. If the child was supposed to be created in the father's image, what did Montaigne's failure to produce not only a son but also healthy, robust children who were able to survive past infancy say about him as a father, as an image? I can imagine it must have seemed to him, at times, as if he were giving birth to monsters, or even to death itself. The infant became for him a figure of abjection, increasingly synonymous with the corpse, evidence of death's insistent materiality—a monster.

This biographical knowledge casts new light on the strange analogy in the opening of "De l'oiseveté":

> …and as we see that women, all alone, produce mere shapeless masses and lumps of flesh, but that to create a good and natural offspring they must be made fertile with a different kind of seed; so it is with minds. Unless you keep them busy with some definite subject that will bridle and control them, they throw themselves in disorder hither and yon in the vague field of imagination. (I.8, 25).

The reading that emerges of this passage is twofold. First, the biographical dimension opens the passage up to be read as a self-condemnation. Montaigne's own children, though fertilized from both the male and female "seed," were neither "good"

(*bonne*) nor "natural" (*naturelle*)—they kept dying "at nurse." And, since his daughters died in infancy, they could (tragically, painfully) be described as "mere shapeless masses and lumps of flesh." Indeed, as Montaigne writes elsewhere: "infants that are hardly born…hav[e] neither movement in the soul *nor recognizable shape to the body*" (emphasis my own; II.8, 339). Perhaps Montaigne's dead children were a type of monster created by Paré's "too little a quantity of [male] seed," and so perhaps he was to blame for their short lives. Second, the passage reads as a description of Montaigne's own mind post-retirement. While he advises "you" (which reads here, as it often does, as an address to the self) to "keep [the mind] busy" so as to produce "good and natural offspring" instead of "masses and lumps," it's clear he has not taken this advice. The essays are neither bridled nor controlled, and, though their titles suggest otherwise, they take no "definite subject." Montaigne admits as much by the end of this short piece when he compares his mind to a "runaway horse" and calls his essays "chimeras and fantastic monsters." The essays are thus *not* good and natural offspring, but "shapeless masses and lumps of flesh" (*amas et pièces de chair informes* [F69]).

This seems like an apt characterization of the *Essais*: in writing prose with a "poetic gait," Montaigne ignored the rhetorical conventions of both his contemporaries and ancient predecessors, writing a new form that appeared formless. It is especially apt given that he kept adding to—and rarely, if ever, subtracting from—the essays throughout his lifetime; they simply kept amassing ("Moreover, I do not correct my first imaginings by my second—well, yes, perhaps a word or so,

but only to vary, not to delete" [II.37, 696]). However, in this reading of the essays as the unnatural offspring, Montaigne strangely places himself in the position of the mother, one of those women reproducing "all alone" (*toutes seules*), letting his 'maternal' imagination run wild, and so giving birth to monsters—his essays.

III. The Stone

In "De l'expérience," Montaigne spends six pages detailing the non-metaphorical, material 'monsters' he births: kidney stones. It isn't a stretch to imagine them as monsters: in his book, Paré calls the stones "monstrous things" in his chapter "Of Stones That Are Engendered in the Human Body" (52). And, from his lengthy description of his own illness, it becomes clear that Montaigne also sees the stones as much more than stones.

The stones are abject objects and emblems of his own mortality: "It is some big stone that is crushing and consuming the substance of my kidneys, and my life that I am letting out little by little" (III.13, 1023). Nearly all of the essays, regardless of their named subject, are primarily concerned with death and dying, and since the "stone"—that is, his illness—forces Montaigne to confront death, it can be read as the very impetus to write the essays in the first place. In fact, he creates a direct causal link between his illness and his writing:

> For lack of a natural memory I make one of paper, and as some new symptom occurs in my disease, I write it down. Whence it comes that at the present moment, when I have passed through virtually every sort of experience, if some grave stroke threatens me, by glancing through these little notes,

> disconnected like the Sibyl's leaves, I never fail to find grounds for comfort in some favorable prognostic from my past experience. (III.13, 1021)

In this passage, the "paper memory" of new symptoms quite clearly corresponds with the essays: "these little notes, disconnected like the Sibyl's leaves" that provide "some favorable prognostic from my past experience." Thus, the essays are figured as both a material archive of memory and as symptoms of "my disease" (*mon mal* [F303]). This, in turn, forces us to read "disease" more broadly—as, for instance, the condition of being human and mortal (after all, most of the essays never mention the kidney stones). Again, Montaigne's passivity stands out: as the essayist, he is merely observing and recording his symptoms, neither seeking a cure nor striving to interpret each one.

Montaigne's father died of kidney stones, and he believes this affliction, his inheritance, will kill him, too (Williams 136). For this reason, the disease is also emblematic of family, and in particular of the bond between parents and children; at one point he even describes the illness as "paternally tender" (III.13.1019). If he had had a son, perhaps he would have passed the disease onto him. And, in fact, the act of inscribing his personal experience of the disease into the text of the *Essais* in such detail is a way of passing it onto his progeny, this monstrous book-child, just as his father passed it onto him. With the resonance of the parental relationship in mind, the stones can also be seen as stand-ins for Montaigne's lost daughters—like the daughters, the stones are created from his own seed and are "born" with a body but no life. His inheritance—both from his father and to his daughters—is death. The text, in

recreating Montaigne's experience of passing the kidney stones, thus contradictorily re-produces the births of his daughters, events that led him to suffer and confront death, while also attempting to birth a new child, a son, who has a material body but cannot die: a book.

Montaigne designates the essays as symptoms of "my disease"—the broader condition of being human. His description of the experience of having the specific disease of kidney stones, however, reads as a metaphor for writing the essays in which the kidney stones—those shapeless, monstrous lumps which Montaigne must push out from a narrow passage, as a mother pushes out an infant—correspond to the essays. Of the process of voiding the stones, Montaigne writes:

> [Other people] see you sweat in agony, turn pale, turn red, tremble, vomit your very blood, suffer strange contractions and convulsions, sometimes shed great tears from your eyes, discharge thick, black, and frightful urine, or have it stopped up by some sharp rough stone that cruelly pricks and flays the neck of your penis… (III.13, 1019)

The resonances with labor are clearly visible here: the sweat, the trembling, the contractions, the tears, the large object that must be pushed out regardless. This is both an actual labor—the voiding of the stone—and a metaphorical one—the labor of writing the essays, of birthing a new genre, of creating a 'son' who will carry on his name. The act of writing the essays is thus represented as a deeply physical, and physically demanding, one. In the throes of creation, Montaigne transforms from an impassive observing mind to an agonized, suffering body—from 'male' to 'female,'

from passive to active. Montaigne-the-writer is once again represented as Montaigne-the-mother.

Yet, here, he surpasses the mother! Not only does he later imply that he voids stones at least once a month—"If you do not embrace death, at least you shake hands with it once a month" (III.13, 1020)—reproducing far more quickly and efficiently than a woman, he also goes on, after describing his "labor" above, to describe his countenance during this agony:

> …that cruelly pricks and flays the neck of your penis; meanwhile keeping up conversation with your company with a normal countenance, jesting in the intervals with your servants, holding up your end in a sustained discussion, making excuses for your pain and minimizing your suffering. (III.13, 1019)

In other words, he not only labors far more efficiently than a woman, he is even able to do so with a "normal countenance" (*une contenance commune* [F302]), while jesting and making conversation. This passage turns Montaigne-the-mother into the expectant father—waiting in the other room while the woman labors; he assumes both roles here. The 'male' mind converses, jests, discusses—writes—while the 'female' body labors—also writes. This duality captures one of the contradictions of being a writer: one is simultaneously observer and participant; one records but, in the act of recording, one also is also doing: creating a material text, creating the self via the page, creating, in Montaigne's case, a new genre and form.

The essays are often depicted as something excreted from his body: here, as the kidney stone but elsewhere as excrement, vomit, blood; thus, the *Essais* have not

just emerged from his body but are consubstantial with it. Montaigne's insistence on his writing's corporality registers as a desire to turn the figurative book-child into an actual child, full of all of the monstrous and marvelous physical evidence of living—piss, shit, vomit, blood, kidney stones. It also reads as an argument for writing and thinking as true, even physical, labor. Finally, it is a marker of what makes the genre of the essay different and new. The essay, intent on locating ideas within the lived experience of a specific body, is birthed from the fusing of mind and body, male and female, spirit and flesh.

IV. The Monstrous Child

Montaigne dedicates only one short essay to the monster. The brief piece, "D'un enfant monstrueux," which I will end up quoting nearly in full in the following pages, chronicles a specific firsthand encounter with a child who has a birth defect (he is what we would now call a parasitic twin). The essay begins with a dismissive gesture: "This story [*ce conte*] will go its way simply, for I leave it to the doctors to discuss it" (II.30, 653 / F373). Montaigne's deferral to "the doctors," whom he elsewhere denigrates and derides, is strange. Here, however, the doctors hold significance as symbols of rationality and as experts in the study of the physical body—in science rather than in signs. The early modern monster was rarely seen as a material body: it was understood as an allegory and as a warning or prophecy of the future. By starting with the doctors, Montaigne immediately foregrounds the physicality of this monster over its potential symbolism.

He goes on:

> The day before yesterday I saw a child that two men and a nurse, who said they were the father, uncle, and aunt, were leading about to get a penny or so from showing him, because of his strangeness. In all other respects he was of ordinary shape; he could stand on his feet, walk, and prattle, about like others of the same age. He had not yet been willing to take any other nourishment than from his nurse's breast; and what they tried to put in his mouth in my presence he chewed on a little and spat it out without swallowing. There seemed indeed to be something peculiar about his cries. He was just fourteen months old. (II.30, 653 / F373).

Montaigne's insistence on specific temporality (the day before yesterday; *avant hier*) is an important feature of the essay, a marker of the fact that the writing emerges from a specific place, time, body, and mind (Williams 149). This is neither the open-ended generality of "Once upon a time" that one might see in a traditional *conte* nor the objective specificity of historical writing, e.g. "In April 1580." *Avant hier* is a highly subjective mode of noting time, one that is both specific (on the day it is first spoken) and general (since it is undated, any day could be "the day before yesterday"). Thus, the description of the child is set up within two frames—the medical as well as the subjective, human one. The two are in tension throughout.

Our introduction to the child is unusual. We learn that three people perhaps posing as relatives are showing the child (*le montrer*) for money "because of his strangeness." Because of the title, and because they are *showing* him, we assume this strangeness is physical. But rather than jump straight to a description of this

"strangeness," Montaigne jumps *over* it. When I first read the passage, I thought I had skipped a sentence because of the way Montaigne begins the next: "In all other respects" (*en tout le reste*). How can he tell us about "all other respects" when he has yet to explain the initial respect—the physical strangeness—which must have struck him immediately upon seeing the child? But he does, and in doing, so chooses to give primacy to what makes the child ordinary: he walks, talks, prattles, nurses, spits out food. And yet there is "something peculiar about his cries." For Montaigne, the source of this child's *éstrangété* is first located in his speech (Hampton 20). The paragraph ends with the child's age. Notably, though young, the child is already older than any of Montaigne's infant daughters when they died; he has survived so far.

From there, Montaigne launches into a physical description of the child in a style that Richard Regosin qualifies as "matter-of-factly, coldly, objectively" (165) and Wes Williams, as having "medical precision" (151) and being close to a "medical report" (153). It reads:

> Below the breast he was fastened *and* stuck to another child, without a head, *and* with his spinal canal stopped up, the rest of his body being entire. For indeed one arm was shorter, but it had been broken by accident at their birth. They were joined face to face, *and* as if a smaller child were trying to embrace a bigger one around the neck. The juncture *and* the space where they held together was only four fingers' breadth or thereabouts, so that if you turned the imperfect child over and up, you saw the other's navel below, thus the connection was in between the nipples and the navel. The navel of the

> imperfect child could not be seen, but all the rest of his belly could. In this way all of this imperfect child that was not attached, as the arms, buttocks, thighs, and legs, remained hanging *and* dangling on the other and might reach halfway down his legs. The nurse also told us that he urinated from both places. Moreover, the limbs of this other were nourished *and* living *and* in the same condition as his own, except that they were smaller and thinner. (emphasis my own; II.30, 653 / F373).

Though the description is certainly of a detail and attention that is rare in the *Essais*, it appears neither cold and objective nor medically precise to me. What struck me most on a first reading was, in fact, how blurry an image it gave me and how intentionally confusing the passage seemed to be. I was able to pinpoint a number of sources for this confusion.

First of all, Montaigne over-describes. Seemingly unable to choose one accurate word, here he insists on doubling up: he was fastened *and* stuck; they were joined face to face, *and* as if trying to embrace; the juncture *and* the space. Note other similar instances italicized in the passage above. While the "and" could be used to narrow the description and become more specific, here it joins either two synonymous words (hanging and dangling), creating a redundancy, or it joins two things that feel unlike enough to give pause (juncture and space). A similar redundancy occurs when Montaigne lists all the parts of the "imperfect child" that were *not* attached—"the arms, buttocks, thighs, and legs"—even though he has already made abundantly clear to the reader where the parasitic twin was attached and

that the "rest of his body [was] entire." Clarity (and "medical precision") is usually marked by concision and careful word choice; this passage is marked by prolixity and the inability to choose a word.

Secondly, after establishing that what we are seeing is one child with another, headless body fastened to his ribs, Montaigne goes on, a sentence later, to describe their position as "face to face" (*face à face*). When I first encountered that, I had to reread, just to be sure I hadn't misunderstood, but no: the body is just a body; it has no head, no face. From there, he uses one of his *and*'s, which only adds to my confusion: "and as if a smaller child were trying to embrace a bigger one around the neck." The tenderness of this description alone could refute both Regosin's and Williams's characterizations of this account—but, on top of that, it's visually confusing. Even if I understand "face to face" to mean the two bodies are frontally facing each other, the headless body is still attached in the middle of the torso and thus angled downward. I can't visualize it.

Finally, there is Montaigne's uncertainty with how to refer to the child: rather than settling on specific pronouns and terms beforehand, Montaigne moves between singular and plural pronouns (*il/ils*) as well as from "another child" (*un autre enfant*) to "imperfect" one (*l'imparfaict*) before returning back to "the other" (*l'autre*) (Williams, 153). This profusion of words and phrases creates a sense of uncertainty in the reader of which child is being described, further weakening the image and creating confusion (at least in this reader).

Montaigne's highly subjective, highly literary, and purposefully confusing description is mimetic of the strangeness and doubleness—especially in the excessive use of double descriptions—of the child itself. Montaigne obscures at the same time as he describes. This is the opposite of the coldly neutral medical gaze; in fact, this cloudy, confused description demonstrates his desire *not* to turn the child into an object. It's significant that the passage ends with the nurse asserting the functionality ("he urinated from both places") and thus the humanity of *both* bodies, which also, crucially, are not entirely identical—in addition to having a shorter arm, the "other" one is also "smaller and thinner." This difference is a mark of the individuality, and so again the humanity, of both bodies. Though conjoined, they are not one.

From there, the essay—to quote Horace via Montaigne—"tapers off into a fish" (I.28, 164). Montaigne explains how one might conduct an allegorical reading of the child as a "favorable prognostic to the king that he will maintain under the union of his laws these various parts and factions of our state" before dismissing the idea, and all types of divinations outright.

Next, he describes another monstrous figure he encountered who, unlike the first figure, is made monstrous by lack and could, clothed, pass for normal:

> I have just seen a shepherd in Médoc, thirty years old or thereabouts, who has no sign of genital parts. He has three holes by which he continually makes water. He is bearded, has desire, and likes to touch women. (II.30, 655 / F374)

In such a condensed description, it's interesting what Montaigne chooses to include: Like the child with the parasitic twin who urinates from two places, the shepherd is

also an unusually productive "water" maker. It is their differences that enable the child and the shepherd alike to bring more urine—more of themselves—into the world than others. Monstrosity thus becomes a figure of productivity and creation.

From here, Montaigne moves into an epigrammatic, philosophical mode, which I won't quote in full:

> What we call monsters are not so to God, who sees in the immensity of his work the infinity of forms that he has comprised in it… From his infinite wisdom there proceeds nothing but that is good and ordinary and regular…
>
> We call contrary to nature what happens contrary to custom; nothing is anything but according to nature, whatever it may be. (II.30, 655)

Having begun the essay with a deferral to the doctors, arbiters of knowledge and reason, at its conclusion, Montaigne unexpectedly turns toward God—that which defies human knowledge and reason. And he concludes that even "monsters" are not contrary to nature since they also come from it. Of this moment, Timothy Hampton writes that "the monstrous body is a marker of the limits of human knowledge, of our capacity for our understanding" (20). We may not be able to understand why it exists, but it does; the monstrous body serves, then, as a reminder that we "know" only in the dark—without knowing.

Though Montaigne discourages allegorical readings of the child, such readings inevitably arise in the mind of the reader (in part because he himself invokes the idea!). The monstrous child of course reads as a figure of the monstrous writer with his monstrous text, but which body is the book, and which is the writer? The

child is obviously more 'real': it has a head, a navel, and an otherwise regular body. While the parasitic body—the 'imperfect child'—is smaller and thinner with one shortened arm, no visible navel, and no head. But both function; both are living. While Montaigne lives, he is the thinking, moving, acting child and the book, the parasite. But, once Montaigne dies, the two switch places: the book-child assumes the thinking, acting, living body while the author/father becomes its appendage. As he writes in "De l'amitié":

> There have been nations where by custom the children killed their fathers, and others where the fathers killed their children, to avoid the interference that they can sometimes cause each other; and by nature the one depends on the destruction of the other. (I.28, 166)

The child also can be seen as an allegory for Montaigne as the bereaved father and friend. After the death of a child or a friend as dear as Étienne de la Boétie, the person left behind can feel as if their grief takes on material weight, like they are carrying around the corpse of that "second self" (I.28, 174). And indeed, the essays often read like attempts to converse with those lost, second selves—the lost friend, the lost children. But the monstrous child, with its single head, shows this to be impossible. As a product of Montaigne's mind, the book can never truly talk back; the essay, despite its conversational tone and dialogic nature, can only ever be a monologue. Still, the essays are born from the desire to know and to be known—even if only by oneself.

V. Toward a Conclusion

"I have seen no more evident monstrosity and miracle in the world than myself," Montaigne writes in "Des boyteux" (III.11, 958). The essayist is necessarily a monster and miracle to himself—endlessly strange and incredible. To write from and about the self is to be "pieced together of divers members" (once again *Frankenstein* comes to mind!) (II.28, 165). The monstrous self is shapeless in part because it is infinite and so possesses an "infinity of forms"—of ideas, interests, traits—to explore in writing; the essayist can go on indefinitely, infinitely, in any direction (II.30, 655). In his hands—from his specific subjectivity, location, body—every subject becomes interesting, personal. It is only, however, through the writing of the book that this strangeness and diversity—monstrosity—fully emerges. This monstrosity, though it takes many forms, seems to be nothing so much as a marker of the inconsistent, contradictory, body-bound, custom-bound human. To see and accept one's own monstrosity is to fully see and accept one's own complicated, messy, terrible, terrifying self.

At the same time, the *Essais* speak to the human wish for an inhuman end: to transcend mortality, to live beyond one's physical death. By imagining the essays as a son, Montaigne is able to both birth a child who is 'like' him in a way his daughter isn't (and as the others couldn't have been, had they survived), a son who will, since he lacks a mortal body, surely outlive him—as children are meant to. In this way, this 'son' will bring Montaigne's name and likeness to future generations, just as an actual son might have. In "Au Lecteur," the brief prefatory note to his book, Montaigne even positions the *Essais* as having this function:

> I have dedicated it to the private convenience of my relatives and friends, so that when they have lost me (as soon they must), they may recover here some features of my habits and temperament, and by this means keep the knowledge that they have had of me more complete and alive.

Montaigne's book-child is of him and *like* him but not self-identical: relatives and friends can recover only *some* of his features. The child, like the kidney stone, is abject: infants and young children, not yet socialized (or developmentally ready) to understand cultural norms and taboo, threaten our sense of cleanliness and propriety, especially with regard to bodily functions. And the child—again, like the kidney stone—also holds within it the father's death; eventually, as the child grows, he will be waiting for his father to die so that he can inherit his father's land and position. The *Essais* are perhaps monstrous for this reason, too. Though they come from Montaigne's mind, are of him and often about him, they are still strange to him. And only on his death could the *Essais* become more than a parasite and take on a life of its own.

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It's Not Personal: Understanding the Personal Statement

Backstory

I moved to Santa Cruz two years before starting the PhD at UCSC, so that my husband, who has wanted to be a professor since he was a little boy, could start his. In those years, I held eleven different jobs (and as many as seven at one time) while also submitting work to literary journals, applying to fellowships, residencies, and eventually to PhD programs. I was constantly updating my CV, tweaking my cover letter, responding to LinkedIn messages, sending sycophantic emails. It was expensive to live here, of course, and my husband was, of course, a graduate student; I had just graduated from the MFA and wasn't sure what I wanted to do, other than write poetry, but I was extremely anxious about being unemployed. My MFA had been an idyllic time—a time out of time, a time of no savings, of getting by, a time of lots of writing, a time of mostly invisible labor (reading, writing manuscripts for the desk drawer, housework, adjuncting, etc.)—but now I had graduated, and I felt pressure to be a Real Adult again. I needed to contribute to my languishing retirement fund. I needed a couch.

In retrospect, the anxiety was as much existential as it was financial: I couldn't bear to be idle. The MFA had given me a framework for my idleness—something to work toward even when it looked like (to someone outside academia, someone who was not a writer) I wasn't working. Without that framework, that structured lack of structure, that university funding, I couldn't do it—just write, just read. I wanted to be an artist but not enough to starve. Not even enough to deprive

myself of Bonne Maman blackberry jam. But mostly, I couldn't bear to be seen as lazy; I wanted my labor to be highly visible—to others. You could say capitalism had trained me well (true), but it's also that I've always been one of those people who functions best when busy. Otherwise, I get sad; can feel what Spinoza calls my "power of acting" decreasing, the time somehow slipping away, unaccounted for. But I also needed to be writing, or what was the point of it all—of the hustling, of the no-health-insurance contract jobs, of the unpredictability and risk? If I wasn't writing, why wasn't I working for a Silicon Valley start-up, eating free lunch, napping in a hammock under my standing desk—instead of eating beans and rice for lunch in a freezing house in the woods?

When I was a student at Iowa, the poet/professor/philosopher Fred Moten came to speak, and he spoke about poetry, but also about the concept of work. At some point, he said, he realized he was writing more emails than poems, or emails instead of poems. Eventually, he said he realized "[t]he problem wasn't my emails, the problem was 'my work.' What I really need to do is eliminate 'my work,' so I can write emails all the time." Everyone laughed. At the time, I wasn't sure what Moten meant, but I knew he'd said something I'd needed to hear, and immediately wrote his words down in my Notes app, filing them away for later. In the weeks that passed, I thought of them periodically. I knew collaboration had become integral to Moten's work, and I knew he was talking partially about that—about correspondence and conversation as a valid, valuable mode of working and writing. But I was more interested in the other possibility his words held: that of collapsing the distinction

between his "work"—poetry, articles, book projects—and his "job"—teaching, advising students, attending faculty meetings, completing university paperwork, and of course, responding to emails.

As I graduated from Iowa and began applying for jobs (cover letters, resume updates, interview prep interviews) then continued applying for jobs while working—adjuncting at UCSC and SJSU, writing articles for a trade paper, tutoring high schoolers in English (literature), tutoring high schoolers in English (as a second language), helping high schoolers write their college application essays, teaching composition to undergraduates, editing interviews for a literary website, editing a magazine for children, responding to so many emails every day—I thought of Moten's words more and more. *How could I do this?* I wondered, exhausted, at the end of almost every exhausting day, unable to think exhaustively around any question. *How could I make my work my work?*

One answer was right in front of me: apply to PhD programs with a partially creative focus—a PhD program that would force to prioritize my "work" over any of my many jobs. And yet even then I knew a PhD program, especially one in Santa Cruz, where I hoped to matriculate and where rents were some of the highest in the country (not to mention gas and groceries), would not pay enough for me to feel comfortable quitting my jobs which I had worked hard to secure and then make secure. And so, even after I had been accepted by UC Santa Cruz, and subsequently accepted the university' offer, the central problem remained: How could I make my

work my work? Or how could I work my job so it stopped working me—working me over and out and up?

One day, an answer came to me. It was August. I was visiting my parents at home, in New York City. I was spending the better part of my days editing college application essays ("Try to *show* not *tell* us this here") and then emailing the heavily marked-up documents to high school students ("Don't worry—this level of comments and edits is *totally normal* at this stage. I love where this essay is going!"). It was still summer, which meant many of my students were finalizing their personal statements, a 650-word personal essay. This essay, which can be written in response to one of seven broad questions, gets shared with every college to which the student applies via the Common App portal. Though some colleges require additional essays ("supplemental essays"), these are usually much shorter and less personal, a way to weed out 'what the hell' applicants. This means the personal statement is not only the most open-ended and creative essay the students write—at its best, a true personal essay—it is also the most important one: their futures are (or seem to be) riding on it. My job was to help students write the best personal statement they were capable of writing—to help them realize (ethically okay), but not exceed (ethically not okay), their potential.

Over the years of doing this work, I had come to see the personal statement not as formulaic (though the worst ones could be that) but as highly formal. Just as a sonnet follows certain rules (iambic pentameter, an *abab cdcd efef gg* rhyme scheme, if Shakespearean, a volta), but over the years has evolved to include pretty much any

poem that's about 14 lines—in the process, rendering any contemporary by-the-book Shakespearean sonnets feel more "formulaic" than "formal"—so the personal statement has a set of rules and conventions which, if too closely followed, make the essay formulaic.

In his brief guide to writing a personal statement, one medical student writes:

> Your personal statement is not a journal or diary. You must order thoughts in a professional and logical manner. Using sentences of different lengths can help engage the admissions panel, who often have to read through thousands of statements.[70]

I was struck by the fact that this student used the journal or the diary to describe what the personal statement is *not*. It is not random, spontaneous, overly intimate; it is ordered, professional, logical. According to this student, it is not even creative: the actual writing itself—here only touched on with regard to sentence length—is incidental, something merely to be capitalized on to "engage the admissions panel." The split immediately reads as feminine/masculine, going back to the second-wave feminist thinkers, such as Genevieve Lloyd and Sandra Gilbert, who argue that reason is itself gendered male. In "Personal Statement," I am 'feminizing' the 'masculine' personal statement—first by simply claiming it as a creative form, and second, by writing in an increasingly disordered, diaristic mode as the manuscript progresses.

On a macrolevel, the personal statement is a bildungsroman in miniature: its primary goal as a form is to show the writer's "purposeful development toward

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[70] Sunila Prasad, "How to Write Your Personal Statement: View from a Successful Medical Student," *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 350 (2015), http://www.jstor.org/stable/26973513.

maturity."[71] To do so, the writer must "think for [them]self about [them]self," a process that involves finding "their own voice as author, authority" and requires a degree of separation from their own lives and experiences.[72] On a microlevel, the formal features of the personal statement often include: an opening anecdote, summarized backstory, a climactic scene that leads to a clear epiphany, and finally, a neat ending with a strong sense of closure—all in no more than 650 words. The best writers—maybe 1-2 of my 15 clients per year—are able to experiment within the form, to push boundaries and break rules. The strongest essays do it all: "reveal personality; possess dynamic impact; show growth; begin and end in intriguing ways; are filled with colorful images, dialogue, and details; and 'sing' with a unique style."[73] For the rest of the writers, writing within the form is enough of a challenge, so we work together to find the best, most surprising topic then, together, worked to wrangle it into shape.

Back to New York City, August. Overall, my mood was not good. Working with students on these highly formal (and occasionally formulaic) essays, I felt frustrated and creatively stifled both inside and outside of my job. On top of this, although I was about to start a PhD program, I had no intellectual life to speak of; I

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[71] Aleksandar Stević, *Falling Short: The Bildungsroman and the Crisis of Self-Fashioning* (University of Virginia Press, 2020), 3, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvzgb7sk.
[72] Sarah Meyers McGinty, "In the Space Provided: The College Application Essay," *The English Journal* 84, no. 3 (March 1995): 71.
[73] Catherine Sagan, "Adding a Human Dimension to the College Numbers Game," *The Clearing House* 76, no. 1 (2002): 47.

knew imposter syndrome in the academy was common, especially for women, but I was sure that this was different—I was a true imposter.

Then, one morning, as I ran my six-mile loop in Central Park, Moten's words once again popped into my head. How could I *eliminate my work?* Or, how could I make my work *my work?* The words beat out over and over to the rhythm of my feet striking the pavement—*How. Can. I. Make. My. Work. My. Work. How. Can. I. Make. My. Work. My. Work. How. Can. I.*—until an answer, unexpectedly, came to me. I had spent years becoming an expert in the form of the personal statement—so why not, following the idea of "received forms" in poetry or the hermit crab essay in creative nonfiction, use the form to tell my own story? I could write a coming-of-age memoir made up a series of short essays—of personal statements, themselves coming-of-age stories in miniature; it would be like those photographs made up of other photographs.

In his introduction to the anthology *The Art of the Personal* Essay, Phillip Lopate writes, "The personal essay is the reverse of that set of Chinese boxes you keep opening, only to find a smaller one within. Here you start with the small—the package of flaws and limits—and suddenly find a larger container, insulated by the essay's successful articulation and the writer's self-knowledge."[74] My book could enact this expansion not only on the level of the individual essay (the small as entry

[74] Phillip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present* (Anchor Books, 1995), xxviii.

point to the large) but on the level of the book—each small essay adding up to something larger—literally, the book itself.

The more I thought about this idea, the more excited I became. The personal statement dramatizes many of the existing tensions within creative nonfiction: the genre's uneasy association with trauma and tragedy (overall, the idea that if one has experienced either, one is practically obligated to exploit/explore it in the genre); the imperative to "show and not tell" which often means pushing the boundary between fact and fiction (if you don't remember a scene-setting detail, you can always make it up); the expectation that the writer will map experiences and events along a conventional narrative arc even if that's not exactly how it happened or how it felt (again, the question of truth); the push and pull between wanting to be fully seen and understood as you are with wanting to be liked and accepted; the pressure to provide closure, even where there isn't any (how clean life seems on the page!); and finally, the puritan obligation to show that the experience produced personal growth (a final, capitalist pressure for the essay, for experience, for life itself! to be "productive").

For applicants, the personal statement is a big deal. It is their chance to distinguish themselves from the thousands of other applicants, to become something more than a set of numbers, and it is often the only opportunity they get to speak "directly" to the admissions committee—to be personal, to be seen as a person. The fact that most schools only require the one essay is practical—thousands of applications must be read and evaluated in a few months—but it also implies a certain philosophy of the self: that there is a single unified one, and that one or two

experiences can accurately show who "I" am. This is not Walt Whitman's "I"—"Do I contradict myself? / Very well, I contradict myself. / (I am large, I contain multitudes)." Admissions readers aren't interested in the contradictory, multitudinous self; they are interested in seeing whether the applicant has specific positive qualities—like leadership, charisma, curiosity, the capacity to be a "team player"—that will benefit their institution, while also expecting the essay to be authentic, honest, true (as well as engaging, creative, unique).

My manuscript aims to underscore the hypocrisy of this expectation: how can an essay that shows the speaker in a wholly, or even mostly, or even ultimately, positive light be authentic, honest, true? By contrast, many of the personal statements in my manuscript explore explicitly ugly and small feelings: envy, spite, annoyance, anxiety, insecurity, pride, to name just a few. My manuscript also pushes against the idea that the self can be encapsulated in a single narrative. Here, the personal statement is not unique; there are many, and each one presents a new version of the self—not so much to undermine the idea of a stable identity, but to present life and the self as they are: perpetually changing, and not always for the better.

I also see the form as dramatizing one of the main concerns of the manuscript: control. The admissions essay is one aspect of the process where the applicant feels they have some control. And yet, like all control, it is an illusion: no author is wholly in "control" of their text, nor is anyone in control of the circumstances they were born into or the events that impact their lives—all of which go into forming a narrative, a perspective, and a voice.

The Occluded Genre

In 1996, John Swales advocated for the study of what he called "occluded genres" in academia. His partial list includes application letters and essays (for jobs, schools, scholarships), research proposals, recommendation letters, submission letters, and more. Though occluded genres include spoken elements (namely, job talks and interviews), they primarily take the form of "formal documents which remain on file" but "are rarely part of the public record," remaining "'occluded' from the public gaze by a veil of confidentiality."[75] In these documents, written for a specific, small audience, the author is "seriously concerned with representing [themselves] in a favourable professional light."[76] Focusing on the manuscript submission letter, Swales examines the way such genres not only facilitate the manufacture of knowledge but also construct the writer's identity in relation to the reader. The more skillful the writer, the better she is able to harness "the arts and skills of professional self-presentation" to portray herself as the reader's peer, while also acknowledging that she must present herself and her work as worthy of institutional investment.[77]

The personal statement is an example of what John Swales calls an "occluded genre"—a formal document written for an admissions panel that remains hidden,

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[75] John M. Swales, "Occluded Genres in the Academy: The Case of the Submission Letter," in *Academic Writing: Intercultural and Textual Issues* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1996), 46.
[76] Swales, 46.
[77] Swales, 56.

confidential. In "Personal Statement," I render the usually invisible and secretive form of the personal statement public, visible. In this way, I am hoping to make a political statement by pushing against the occlusion of this gatekeeping genre which has served to reinforce socioeconomic inequities in higher education, and so in society at large.

At the same time, the fact that the personal statement is occluded from the public view in addition to being written for a tiny audience of strangers makes it a highly intimate and confessional form (not, in fact, unlike another private, often hidden form—the diary). The college essay is a place where applicants tell stories from their lives that sometimes they've never told their parents or their closest friends. One of my college essay clients who decided, with my guidance, to write his personal statement about his experience with a congenital medical condition wrote at the opening of this essay that this was a difficult topic for him to address as he had never discussed it with anyone outside of his family (except, at that point, me, his college essay editor). Thus, to write in the form is a shortcut to establishing a certain level of intimacy with the reader; however, it also sets up the expectation of confession. "Personal Statement" plays with, and often frustrates, this expectation—by writing about topics that I would discuss with anyone (my name, my former jobs, love of running) and by adopting distancing strategies—poetry, quoted emails, among others—when touching on customarily 'confessional' subjects such as rape and other early sexual experiences. Thus, in refusing to engage in long, cohesive narrative accounts of the more difficult experiences in my life—by withholding, by choosing a

short form into which the whole story could never really 'fit'—"Personal Statement" is perhaps making a "statement" about the readerly desire to see and know all. Both the personal statement and the personal essay are forms in which the writer, and especially the woman writer is expected to share all: to expose herself. And in the hopes of getting admitted or getting published, the writer may force themself to tell their most private stories even when they don't wish to—as in the case of my student writing about his medical condition.

Interestingly, the personal statement (at least the one written for admission to undergraduate programs) is doubly occluded: in 2015, after elite schools began to receive a flood of requests from students requesting access to their admissions data, many began destroying existing files and implementing new policies to remove the files even before students matriculated.[78] Thus the personal statement is not only occluded but also ephemeral—with both the document and the readers' responses to it being erased only a few short months after it has served its purpose. This ephemerality underscores the essay's utilitarian nature: its purpose is to get the writer into college. To convince, persuade, to charm. To move or amuse. To make a case—without explicitly making that case. To cherry-pick, to narrativize, to blur. Isn't this, in some ways, the purpose of writing—perhaps most especially of nonfictional writing, with its collapsed boundary between writer and speaker/character? Aren't we all convincing, persuading charming, attempting to move or amuse our reader, to

[78] Tyler Foggatt, "Admissions Office Changes File Retention Policy," Yale Daily News, March 25, 2015, https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2015/03/25/admissions-office-records-no-longer-accessible/.

ingratiate ourselves, to be likeable (even in our unlikability?), to present a version of ourselves they might want to know, might want to befriend? The form of the personal statement thus foregrounds this often hidden (and rarely conscious) 'purpose,' and my manuscript specifically addresses it as well, through meta-discussions of nonfiction as a genre and by breaking the 'fourth wall' with occasional direct addresses to the reader.

Lastly, in writing a series of personal statements, I am not only addressing the reader as if they were a member of an admissions committee, someone whose attention is not a given, I am also setting the reader up in an evaluative relationship to the text as well as to me, the writer. The form intensifies the uncomfortable, uneasy relationship that always exists between reader and writer.

"Personal" "Statement"

I see "Personal Statement" as a 'feminine' text, largely influenced by and participating in the lyric diary tradition, a form that triangulates the essay, the diary, and the lyric poem. Although its partial focus on the narrator's childhood sets it apart from the lyric diaries I have identified as paradigmatic of the genre, it still possesses other essential features. It is written from the point of view of a wife and is constructed from a series of short essays that can be called "shreds." It does not have a conventional plot, much less a clear beginning or ending, it is written in straightforward, rarely figurative prose, and it often refuses to explain or describe, frustrating the reader's desire for connection. It moves sideways, rather than forward,

haltingly rather than smoothly. And it also does the work of taking back time that would have been wasted: I stumbled on the form when asking myself what I could do with time that would otherwise be spent on work that was not personally meaningful to me.

I also see it as participating in the tradition of the *kunstlerroman,* a novel which traces the artist's coming of age (though perhaps because it's nonfiction, it should be called the *kunstlermemoiren*) since, through the collage of disparate anecdotes and insights, a narrative of my growth as an artist, up to and including the creation of "Personal Statement" itself, slowly emerges. In this way, it is also influenced by autofiction—novels that not only push the boundary of fiction/nonfiction but that also tell the story of their own creation.[79] Finally through the form of the personal statement, it is playing with questions of likeability, conformity, morality, and the legibility of the self, ideas that are inherent to the application essay genre.

I love the title "personal statement" because the contradictory phrase immediately brings to mind the tension between the lyric ("personal") and the anti-lyric ("statement") that animates both my manuscript and the lyric diary as a genre. How can a "statement"—that formal, contrite address I associate with disgraced businesses—also be "personal"?

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[79] Jonathon Sturgeon, "2014: The Death of the Postmodern Novel and the Rise of Autofiction," *Flavorwire*, accessed January 29, 2021, https://www.flavorwire.com/496570/2014-the-death-of-the-postmodern-novel-and-the-rise-of-autofiction.

And then there are smaller resonances that thrill me. The word "personal" is now permanently linked to the feminist movement—not only through the infamous slogan "the personal is political," but also in the many ways the feminist movement aimed to break down the boundaries between the personal and the professional. Turning to the *OED*, I find, among its definitions, "relating to, or belonging to one's person, body or appearance; bodily; physical": a bodily statement—another contradiction, one that brings together the body and the mind, the physical and the verbal. And there is also "having oneself as object" (yes) and "characteristic of a person…as opposed to a thing or abstraction," which gestures toward the manuscript's concrete, literal nature as well as its concern with the human.

Looking up "statement," I am similarly taken. A statement is about telling your side of the story, setting things straight: a business in need of rescuing their image makes a statement to the media. There is also a fitting pettiness to the word. The "statement of account" is a document detailing financial expenditure and receipts over a certain period—an obsession with what one has given and what one owes to others. (I think here of Patricia Hampl who writes, of Augustine, that he "recalls the harshness of his school days and the cruelty of his teachers with the scorekeeping precision of a true memoirist, immune to the irritating wisdom of forgiving and forgetting"[80]). Finally, to "make a statement" (singular) is to "stand out"—an irony given the multiplicity of statements in my manuscript: no single one stands out. I

[80] Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 175.

hope this mirrors one of the aims of the manuscript, which is to examine the self not as *my*self but as "a supposed person"—as a representative of the human.

In a recent article, Jane Gallop said, "I'm much more comfortable with certain kinds of exposure than most people are… I feel like what I can offer the world is a certain honesty about exposing things that happened to other people but that they don't tend to expose, so it allows me to offer the possibility of people thinking through that experience."[81] Honesty, the capacity to look closely—even systematically, scientifically—at my actions and experiences, and to think through them for and with others—like Gallop, I believe these are what I have to offer as a writer and as a thinker, whether I am writing critically or creatively In my manuscript, I aim to read experience as text—not so much (or not only) in reliving or rewriting it, but in "close reading" it: trying to understand the "form" of life, and how that acts on, changes, perhaps determines the content.

In the summer of 2022, I participated in a life-writing conference called "Life's Not Personal." I love this phrase as it pithily captures what I've been trying to tell others (students, peers, readers) for years: that writing about your life isn't *personal* since, in order to write well about any experience, "a writer must first find the distance and separation that frees one to speak…must create an 'I' in their text who is different from the writer creating the texts."[82] This sounds more difficult to do

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[81] "Jane Gallop Is Talking About Sex Again," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 20, 2019, https://www.chronicle.com/article/jane-gallop-is-talking-about-sex-again/.
[82] McGinty, "In the Space Provided: The College Application Essay," 71–72.

than it is. In fact, with enough time, the "distance and separation" occurs naturally: nearly all experiences soon become another story we tell. Proof: Whenever I look at old photos—whether from a few months ago or six years ago—with my husband, we repeat a series of predictable phrases: *It seems so long ago, I can't even remember Margot [our daughter] at that age, I forgot we used to do that*. Every time—the surprise! That was *us*, or *you*, or *me* that happened to you. And yet! And yet? And yet.

Though memories are *ours*, as time passes, they begin to feel like they belong to someone else, happened to someone else. And in a way, they did—to our past self. This is why, like many other writing teachers, I tell my students writing memoir not to write about an event in the too-recent past. They don't yet have the distance necessary to separate themselves from the experience, and "an ordeal, served up without perspective or perceptiveness, is merely an ordeal."[83] I like that the phrase "personal statement," while in some ways a contradiction, at the same time feels very true to this experience of the past—that is, to the objectivity ("statement") that comes with distance.

I recently submitted some hybrid prose writing to the essay portal of the literary journal, *Guernica*. Their rejection letter read: "We appreciate the opportunity to consider your work, especially material that's so personal. Thanks for sharing your story with us." The letter made me cringe. It *wasn't* personal; it was—as they

[83] Neil Genzlinger, "The Problem with Memoirs," *The New York Times*, January 28, 2011, sec. Books, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/30/books/review/Genzlinger-t.html.

themselves had noted—*material*. I had submitted as a *writer*, not as a *person*. I had not been sharing my *story* but my *work.* Clearly, they had missed the point.

Guernica's rejection encapsulates something I hate about writing from my life, no matter the form: readers become so focused on the experiences being discussed—especially if they are traumatic or sad or, alternatively, salacious—that at some point, most readers stop seeing a writer and start seeing a person. Or rather: they see the writer and the speaker as one. This is the same issue that has made it so difficult for the Confessional poets to have their work read as, well, work, not confession, and it is also the same issue that the essay, and creative nonfiction in general, is up against. It's part of the magic of the genre—that the reader feels you are confessing to them, sharing the most private, intimate parts of you or your life—and yet also one of its main difficulties as a form. Many don't know how to read such overtly personal work as literature, and so decide that it shouldn't be classified as literature at all.

A Conclusion

I see "Personal Statement" as an attempt to return to a Montaigne-inspired type of essay while blending in some of the new techniques of the contemporary lyric essay. Like Montaigne, I aim to pick a subject—any subject, no matter how apparently trivial or random—and gather all I know, mostly from experience, about it. The resulting essays are parts of a larger whole—like chapters; that is to say, like Montaigne's essays, they are best when read in conjunction with the rest of the work as they echo, reference, and build on each other throughout. While my essays draw

much more on the personal and the first-person that Montaigne's (especially his early essays), I see them unfolding in similarly fragmented, associative ways—of following Montaigne's "poetic gait" that moves "by leaps and gambols" (III.9, 925). In this way, my essays also echo the contemporary lyric essay, which similarly expects the reader to work to find meaning among the collected "evidence."

My matter-of-fact tone and occasional use of fact without commentary or analysis also reflects the influence of the contemporary lyric essay; however, I am also working to push back against the increasing politicization and apparent "objectivity" of the form in an attempt to return to a search for capital-t Truth, which includes a return to a Montaignian sense of fallibility and confusion ("There is not a man living whom it would so little become to speak from memory as myself, for I have scarcely any at all, and do not think that the world has another so marvelously treacherous as mine."[84]). The facts I use are mostly personal facts, collected from experience or documents from my own life, rather than from Google, an archive, or *The New York Times*; in this way, they are by default open to errors. Furthermore, my decision to use the form of the personal statement, a form intended to allow the speaker to admit to vulnerability and yet is expected to conclude in a way that eliminates confusion and ambiguity, emphasizes the very impossibility of this endeavor—the endeavor of living without confusion or ambiguity, of creating a coherent narrative of anything, including the self. The multiplicity of personal

[84] Montaigne, Michel de. Book I, Chapter IX.

statements alone speaks to this impossibility, as does the way the form slowly disintegrates across the course of the manuscript.

At the same time, while the manuscript attempts to resist the political, it inevitably finds itself drawn back into it, as the speaker is compelled to examine the ways class and race have shaped her experiences and her identity. Unlike the contemporary lyric essay, however, I work backward from the personal to the political, rather than starting from the political and into the personal.

I hope that my manuscript, by bringing the essay back to its origins, its *essence,* is thus able to expand the field of the lyric essay.

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