The Essay as Art Form

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Abstract

Beginning with Montaigne's essayistic dictum *Que sais je?* — 'What do I know?' — this PhD thesis examines the literary history, formal qualities, and theoretical underpinnings of the personal essay to both investigate and to practice its relevance as an approach to writing about art. The thesis proposes the essay as intrinsically linked to research, critical writing, and art making; it is a literary method that embodies the real experience of attempting to answer a question.

The essay is a processual and reflexive mode of enquiry: a form that conveys not just the essayist's thought, but the sense and texture of its movement as it attempts to understand its object. It is often invoked, across disciplines, in reference to the possibility of a more liberal sense of creative practice — one that conceptually and stylistically privileges collage, fragmentation, hybridity, chance, open-endedness, and the meander.

Within this question of the essay as form, the thesis contains two distinct and parallel strands of analysis — subject matter and essay writing as research. At the core of the study lie two close-readings: Ana Mendieta's *Labyrinth of Venus* (1982) and *Le Couvent de la Tourette* (1959) by Le Corbusier and Iannis Xenakis. In each case, the writing draws, in its tone and texture, on a range of literary influences, weaving together different voices, discussions, and approaches to enquiry. The practice of essay writing is presented alongside, part and party to, research: a method of interrogation that embraces risk and uncertainty, and simultaneously enacts its own findings as a critical-creative mode of study-via-form, and form-via-study.

The thesis is presented as a book-length essay, in which the art in question is equal and intimately connected to the writing used to address it. Method and form are designed to respond to the oft-cited challenge of the essay as fundamentally *un*methodical, ranging, and diverse. Research, critical study, writerly description, and storytelling are combined to elucidate and expose each other based not on surface continuity, but on a deep interconnection among ideas that, through language, cohere and become related — imbued with an affinity for one another. The consummate product *is* the argument, as it works across genres, disciplines, descriptive and critical models, to challenge the narrative structure and language used within contemporary writing about art.

Contents

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I owe a great deal to my friends, who have provided rich emotional and intellectual sustenance.

Most of all, endless thanks to my parents — for *everything*.

Author's declaration

During the period of study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification.

The material in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

Signature:

Date:

Preface: An Essay on The Essay as Art Form

Essaying will destroy you; it will break your heart.

Well — who knows if this is really true.

What *is* true? For three months, during the final stages of the body of work you read here, I woke every day with this phrase running through my mind. It's not entirely mine: a slight modification of Charles Shulz's oft-quoted statement, 'cartooning will destroy you; it will break your heart'.[1] But the essay — 'essaying' — seemed to slip in seamlessly, as it had already done within so many other parts of my life.

I had recently moved house, and in my flat, the bed was on a small mezzanine above the kitchen. On my first morning, the advent of this new refrain, I noticed that there was a small hole in the ceiling right above me. Without thinking, I extended my leg into the air and stuck my toe in, pushing gently to see how deep it was. Small pieces of white paint and plaster flaked down onto the bedcovers. I reminded myself not to do it again — don't *trash* the place — you *just* moved in — but every morning, unfailingly, as I thought about essaying, destruction, and heartbreak, I would find my toe in that hole, digging away, pressing on what felt like a hard, metal stud at its centre, somewhere in the floor above. It was comforting in a way. I imagined the hole was an eye, watching me as I slept, reminding me as I waked to continue the essay, the essaying. Nudge nudge, wink wink. Why this phrase, I would wonder, and what does it mean? The hole got deeper and deeper.

I encountered Schulz's words long ago, and they had touched me deeply: what was it about *cartooning* — of all things in life — that caused the break, the shatter, the skitter scatter?

What perhaps most distinguishes a 'cartoon' from a 'drawing' is its avowed absence of facsimile. The import of a cartoon is, in fact, negotiated in the space between the subject and the interpretation — close, far, simple, exaggerated — these choices tell us what the cartoonist is trying to say. Not so unlike the decisions made in most creative

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1 Charles M. Schulz, as cited in *The Comics Journal, Issues 265-268* (Seattle: Fantographics Books), p.174.

undertakings. For instance, I have no skill as a draughtswoman, but I imagine that cartooning is like essaying, in a sense — arranging lines and symbols on a page in order to form a representation, wondering how a subject might be *animated* in order to cohere, to paint a picture, come to life.

In Fine Art, a 'cartoon' is a preparatory design, drawing, or painting: a sketch, a rough, an outline — an *impression*. A cartoon is and will always be, by definition, unfinished. Was it this impossibility of completion, I wondered, that cracked the cracks, dug the hole, broke the solid, beating things into pieces?

Maybe it was simpler than that. Maybe it was how often things are both funny and sad at the same time. For instance: A little boy perpetually surrounded by a cloud of dirt; a child piano prodigy who executes perfect renditions of Beethoven on a toy-sized piano; a bald four-year-old who wears the same shirt and doesn't age for five decades; adults who can only be seen from the ankles down, and whose voices resemble unintelligible honking noises. A dog with a typewriter: he's working on a masterpiece — *it was a dark and stormy night*.

In other words, childhood, from the perspective of an adult. In other words, adulthood, and life in general, from the perspective of a human being: things are incongruous — it's funny! — but also sad, and sometimes humiliating — we have moments of greatness and moments of crippling defeat — it is often the small things that seem to mean the most.

Maybe what my daily mantra had seized upon was the manner in which cartooning, like essaying, is a reckoning with a fundamental infinitude — the notion that we cannot grasp the whole of anything, that every subject and experience contains incommensurable qualities, rendering it impossible to contain within a single representation. And so to choose each day to sketch a sketch, to cartoon, to essay, is to participate in a form that embraces this fact. It is to draw lines around an empty space, to stroke the contours softly, sweetly, in the hopes that a form will emerge, the embodiment of a work forever in progress. An essay is, after all, an *essay* — a test, a trial, an experiment.

The essay must let the totality light in one of its chosen or haphazard features but without the assertion that the whole is present.[2]

And who would ever claim that the swell of the heart — the rise and rise — before it bursts and breaks isn't intoxicating, each and every time.

No matter the end, everything, everyone needs to begin somewhere. That single point on the page, nib to paper, black to white, from which the line stretches and curls and circles around and in on itself to shape forms and structures. Sometimes the trajectory is carefully planned and executed, but sometimes it makes no sense at all. Sometimes you can't tell whether you are drawing the line, or the line is drawing you. Sometimes, you don't care; at least you know you're *going* somewhere.

How funny your name would be
if you could follow it back to where
the first person thought of saying it…It would
be like following a river to its source,
which would be impossible. Rivers have no source.[3]

This is not, strictly speaking, true. But it's a nice idea, isn't it, that rivers 'just automatically appear at a place / where they get wider, and soon a real / river comes along, with fish and debris, / regal as you please, and someone / has already given it a name'.[4] That at any point, anywhere, water might rise to the surface and begin to flow, course, gush — engulf and incorporate everything in its path — just try to stop it.

The beginning of *The Essay as Art Form* involved a great deal of thinking about *sources* and *origins*: how to locate the beginning, follow the progress of a form that is so fluid. Few aim to comprehensively chart or explain the unwieldy form. There is a general consensus amongst scholars that the essay proper originated in the mid- to late-16th century, with the works of Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) and, shortly thereafter, Francis Bacon (1561–1626). Montaigne's works were published under the eponymous title, *Essais*; now considered hallmarks of the form, the *Essais* comprise writings of various lengths, which combined personal reflections, literary quotations, philosophy, observations about writing, the author himself, people, relationships — topics as diverse as friendship,

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2 Theodor Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', *New German Critique*, 32 (1984), p.164.

3 John Ashbery, 'Myrtle', in *Notes from the Air: Selected Later Poems* (London: Harper Collins, 2007), p.129.

4 Ibid.

cannibalism, learning, truth, and judgment. Each essay unfolds differently, according to the subject matter at hand, a representation of the writer's mind as he considers it: the act of writing is placed in the foreground, privileged as process — the means by which the author discovers what he thinks. Following Montaigne and Bacon, the form is then considered to have developed most significantly through the 18th-century English and then the 19th-century American essayists.

Recent scholarship — John D'Agata's *The Lost Origins of the Essay*, for instance — has looked back to posit forerunners of the essay in early forms of both Western and Eastern writing — from Heraclitus, Seneca, and Plutarch, to Li Tsun Yuan, Yoshida Kenkō, and Sei Shonagon.[5] This is of course designated in retrospect, chicken/egg, egg/chicken, etc., but the emphasis is less on tracing a lineage than establishing the essay as not just a literary form — *that which we call The Essay, by any other name* — but as a particular mode of writing: an approach, a methodology, an ethos. A call for the new essay via the old.

'Essay' is a verb, not just a noun; 'essaying' is a process.[6]

This kind of writing practice is now often referred to as 'the lyric essay' and/or, 'creative non-fiction', and has been similarly championed by writers like David Shields, whose *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* is a book-length collection of authors' quotations, interspersed with his own writings, and organised under a list of themes: mimesis, memory, blur, collage, genre, contradiction, doubt, autobio, persona, etc. It is, in essence, a commonplace book of proposals about what a liberated non-fiction might look like: a writing that is interested in how language is used and ideas are structured, and so widely seeks influences in form, regardless of genre, discipline, or context.

It gives primacy to artfulness over the conveying of information, forsaking narrative line, discursiveness, and the art of persuasion in favour of idiosyncratic meditation… It may, though, meander, making use of other genres when they serve its purpose, sampling the techniques of fiction, drama, journalism, song, and film. The stories it tells may be no more than metaphors. Or, storyless, it may spiral in on itself, circling the core of a single image or idea, without climax, without paraphrasable theme.[7]

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5 *The Lost Origins of the Essay*, ed. and intro. by John D'Agata (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2009) brings together a body of texts ranging form 1500 BCE to 1972, examining the manner in which each piece of work can be seen to variously participate in a strand of essaying practice.

6 John D'Agata in conversation, as cited in David Shields, *Reality Hunger* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), p.131.

7 Shields, p.131.

With regards to the essay in particular, these conversations might be seen as a reaction to the diffusion of the form within the 20th century, during which time the essay proper becomes more difficult to pin down. The advent of the popular press and the growth of academic writing produced, and continues to produce, pieces of writing that *resemble* the essay — in size, weight, length, some elements of narrative and treatment of content — but that we might refer to instead as 'articles'. Scholars and practitioners of the essay, alike, have been careful to point out the necessary distinction. As Elizabeth Hardwick writes of William Gass on the essay,

> *Mr. Gass has come to think of the article as 'that awful object' because it is under the command of defensiveness in footnote, reference, coverage, and would also pretend that all must be useful and certain…the polish of 'the scrubbed step' – practical economy and neatness. The essay…is a great meadow of style and personal manner, freed from the need for defense except that provided by an individual intelligence and sparkle.*[8]

Early in my research, it became clear that it is much easier to define what the essay is *not*, than what it is. In part, because of the subjective nature of terms like 'intelligence', 'sparkle', 'pleasure' — or even 'individual', 'thought', 'movement', etc. But also because its formal qualities are — in a sense — formless: the essay is fragmented, it breaks off, digresses, refuses completion, meanders — it is patchwork, a collage, an experiment. The essay methodically moves *un*methodically; the essay is a methodology of *un*methodology. The essay makes and unmakes itself, all at once; like the mind, it cannot be contained, it will not hold still. And most importantly, perhaps, *every essay is different.*

It is for this reason, I suspect, that — aside from monographs, studies of selected works of an individual author, or analyses of very specific elements of the essay form (e.g., persona, narrative, memoir) — the essay is so frequently studied and presented in its anthologised form. As if gathering together like manifestations is the only way to explain the essay: to let it speak for itself. As Adorno writes, in 'The Essay as Form', of a man truly learning to speak rather than simply study a foreign language:

> *He will read without a dictionary. If he has looked at the same word thirty times, in constantly changing contexts, he has a clearer grasp of it than he would if he looked up all the word's meanings; meanings*

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8 Elizabeth Hardwick, 'Its Only Defense: Intelligence and Sparkle', *The New York Times* (14 September 1986) <https://www.nytimes.com/books/98/07/26/specials/hardwick-defense.html> [accessed 23 October 2014] (para. 5 of 20).

that are generally too narrow, considering they change depending on the context, and too vague in view of the nuances that the context establishes in every individual case.[9]

It is imperative to recognise the essay — so often defined by its use of the subjective voice — as a valid, established, and deliberate form, while also acknowledging that every use of it will necessarily generate a different result.

My preliminary research is indebted to the many anthologies and encyclopedias of the essay, most of which are framed by incisive introductions and biographical notes that detail its characteristics and influences — in general and in particular — while maintaining the status of the form as open, mobile, subject to individual interpretation and criteria, and capable of expressions we may not yet have conceived. If for no other reason than that an essay reflects one person's experience of the world; and we simply do not know everyone or everything.

What is at stake in the essay is not the result, but the process. Even if we disagree with what has been stated, the achievement of an essay is to convince us of its logic: why, what, how this particular brain thinks, moves, includes, discards, etc. To believe that there is An Essay or The Essay, is akin to believing there is A Mind or The Mind — singular, neutral, naturally occurring. There is no science of the essay. No precise rules to follow — equations — proofs — predictable outcomes. For instance, were I to study — say — the essays of E.B. White, carefully, rigorously, try to replicate *exactly* his tone, style, and method, I would — at very best — sound like another version of E.B. White: the words would tell you very little about me, save my talent for mimicry. Imitation is, as they say, the highest form of flattery. The history of the essay is full of homage and *imitatio*: as in all creative practices, we learn from our predecessors. But in the essay, we study the process of another's mind, and their voice, not to replicate it or to discover a universal formula, but to open a door into examining and expressing our own. Let E.B. White tell you about his mind! I must tell you about mine.

So what is it that makes an essay work? Is it the voice — the portrait — the reflection of the authors that compels? Even though they are largely composed of subjective material, essays are often quoted as valuable sources, keen and elemental truths — moments in

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9 Theodor Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', *New German Critique*, trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, 32 (1984), p.161.

which observations, like aphorisms, ring clear and true, though, if pressed, we may not be able to say exactly the reason. How and why should we trust what these people say? Because they are good *writers*? It's a kind of madness. And yet, why *not*. Language, syntax, style are full of deep and absorbing mysteries. Like a piece of music — you may know that something gives you pleasure, without being able to say exactly how or what it is about. Other than to say that it perhaps *defies* our expectations of description: that the most beautiful moments of devices are when they un-perform their rules and conventions to reveal surprising moments of meaning. Like the best metaphors — those that surprise with expansive and harmonious dissonance.

The essay is not about inviolable truths, it is about curiosity. Curiosity, I think, and desire. The desire to interrogate the self and the means by which we purport to know — to know what one does not know — that one *does not*, in fact, know. In other words, to learn. The essay avoids a systematic approach, knowing that as soon as a fixed methodology is posited, the thought that occurs within its parameters has been limited and instrumentalised, rather than given the freedom to unfold via process — prose in motion. Just try telling a thing how to behave, or deciding the outcome of a relationship before it has even begun, in absence of time and other variables. Just see what you end up with. As Wordsworth said, *we murder to dissect.*[10]

The best way to study the essay is by doing it. The writing is the research — the test, the trial, the experiment. I think we owe this understanding, this curiosity, to the subjects and objects of our studies, the language we use to describe them, as well as our methods of research. *Research itself* as process: a thing that unfolds. Let it breathe a little. Don't close your fist too tightly around the tiny body — its bones are hollow, you know, they break easily.

An 'image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time… It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of liberation from time limits and space limits; that sudden sense of growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.[11]

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10 William Wordsworth, 'The Tables Turned', *Lyrical Ballads: With a Few Other Poems* (London: Biggs and Cottle, 1798), p.180.

11 Ezra Pound, as cited in Haun Saussy, 'Fenollosa Compounded: A Discrimination', in Ernest Fenellosa and Ezra Pound, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, ed. by Haun Saussy [et. al.] (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p.10.

The subjects and objects of *The Essay as Art Form* were chosen carefully and specifically — not because I consider them to be 'the greatest works of art', but because of the manner in which each presented to me 'an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time'.

Intellectually, both Ana Mendieta's *Labyrinth of Venus*, 1982, and *Le Couvent Sainte-Marie de La Tourette*, designed by Le Corbusier and Iannis Xenakis, 1959, seemed to possess certain formal or intellectual properties that bore intimate relationship — an *affinity* — to the essay. These are outlined and explored in a variety of incarnations throughout the bodies of writing here that address each work. Emotionally, the two pieces carried deeply personal resonances that — at the outset — I could not readily explain in objective terms. These were to unfold later, through direct encounter and my own writing practice.

A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.[12]

Affinity — from the Latin *affinitas*, from *afinis*, meaning 'related', literally 'bordering on'. *Affinity* — 'a natural liking for and understanding of someone or something' — 'a similarity of characteristics suggesting a relationship, especially a resemblance in structure between animals, plants, or languages'. In biochemistry, it is the degree to which a substance tends to combine with another. In Middle English, the term was originally used to mean relationship by marriage.[13]

Of course, affinity — like marriage — is not a seamless merging, but a carefully negotiated union: a yoking of different elements, the result of which produces something different from, while still including, its original components. Combining the essay form — in theory and in practice — with the study of particular works of art is a kind of marriage. Case studies of affinity — that which borders on — as though the essay and the art works could describe each other — and me — and I them — all at the same time. Together, with writing as a conduit, we could combine to generate a series of exchanges to probe how form and structure, experience and expression, analysis and understanding might translate across disciplines and materials.

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12 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe [et. al.] (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p.129.

13 Oxford Dictionaries online <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/affinity> [accessed 21 June 2015].

A 4-way? A ménage à quatre! *Racy*. And certainly involving a complex series of negotiations to arrive at a healthy, balanced understanding of every body involved; each needed a different kind of care, a different quality of encounter in order to be understood. Strands of research, fieldwork or direct encounter, and writing have been interwoven to produce the final body of work here. In each case, I took cues from the essay as methodology (or unmethodology), as well as the objects in question — particularly the manner in which they had been made. It was important to combine these understandings with my own practice in order to allow process to determine some of the characteristics of the writing ultimately produced — a symbiosis. The goal of the project was to *be* an essay, an experiment, in which I felt it was critical that I be unable to predict the outcome, even as I pursued it.

Not all marriages last forever; no relationship is built upon entirely unbreakable premises. But sometimes even just a little while is good enough: the union, the juxtaposition shows you something you would not have seen otherwise.

Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.[14]

Similarity, difference — distance, proximity — *degree of resemblance*. Affinity bears a correspondence to metaphor — the sliding scale of semblance by which we understand something in greater depth by placing it next to something else, translate it into as many tongues and voices as possible.

During the time that I moved flats, I also got new wheels on my bicycle. When I rode — especially while coasting — the wheels emitted a kind of music — like a choir was singing somewhere in the distance. It took me a few days to realise that it was the bike; each time I heard it, simply thinking — *how beautiful, there's that choir again!* I never paused to consider how it might be possible for this choir to be practising in so many different locations, my logic overwhelmed by feelings of gratitude and reassurance: here was this choir, practicing *every day*, their voices rising together in concert — a promise of stability or permanence. Dedication, maybe. I didn't know that I was, in fact, carrying this promise with me — riding it the whole time — smooth — down — up — hill — rounding corners tightly. Now, each time I *do* hear music in the distance, I feel an

14 Sylvia Plath, 'The Applicant', *Ariel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), p. 15.

indescribable sense of motion: the ride — the roll — the coast. Does it matter how strange and arbitrary this connection is if I can make it feel real to you, too?

Pseudomorphosis, pareidola. *He hears a roar where others hear only a squeak.*[15]

Is it useful, does it reveal some kind of truth to see a face in the moon, or a head in a rocky outcropping on Mars? I guess it depends how lonely you are. Or how unsatisfying you find purely 'factual' description and explanation. For the dirty broken truth of correspondence, with its winsome smile and its pieces offered as a whole, is that there is no such thing. But — *lord what beauty there is in these lusty sallies and variations, and more so the more casual and accidental they seem.*[16]

Through comparison and juxtaposition, metaphor doesn't just say *is* — it asks *what if*. It says *imagine* — a proposal, open-ended. A great and necessary liberty, to be reminded that anything could be, that everything is always much different than we take for granted.

Of course, it's a slippery slope. Much like the essay, metaphor, too, is an unmethodology of sorts. Which does not mean there is no skill, craft, or deep care involved in its making. It *does* mean that sometimes things begin to unravel, and you must be careful about what you allow to take on new and unexpected meaning. If you open the door to metaphor too wide, it will run roughshod over any symbol it can get its hands on.

First she sees that she has [these mixed feelings]. Then she acknowledges them to herself. Then she considers them as a way into the experience. Then she realizes they ***are*** *the experience. She begins to write. Penetrating the familiar is by no means a given. On the contrary, it is hard, hard work.*[17]

At some point along the way, it's hard to say when, the essay became a person — the Essay Woman. She began to colour everything I thought and did — encouraging, praising, scorning, mocking — punishing, pushing, and sometimes loving, holding on to me so hard that it hurt. To say that she was another version of me would be too simple. She was a reminder that process is painful, but revelatory: the essay is the person, the

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15 Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p.8.

16 Michel de Montaigne, 'Of vanity', *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. by Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), p.761.

17 Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2009), p.35-36.

thing we don't say, can't see until it's there on the page staring up at us, wide-eyed in surprise — hey IDIOT! I've been here all along, *waiting*.

And so the essay became a person. It seemed the most reasonable metaphor for something so changeable and diverse: that it was human.

And process became a spell, a ritual, an invocation — an exorcism. Writing as a conjuring. A careful list of ingredients, combined in the just the right way to extract meaning.

The research translated and shape-shifted into various forms and voices. After all, why wouldn't different kinds of information sound different? Perhaps it is not always *I* who should be speaking.

Double double, toil and trouble.[18]

Of Francis Bacon's paintings, Deleuze wrote, 'Pity the meat! […] Meat is not dead flesh; it retains all the sufferings and assumes all the colours of living flesh'.[19] It sounds like a sort of haruspicy, the practice of divination from the inspection of the entrails of sacrificed animals. Examine the organs, what remains, and in them see the life of the entire body.

I wonder if the same can be said of words? Not dead, but living — symbols, language, description. With any given body of work, could we read the entrails, pass our hand over them, feel the heat hovering in the air, and be able to see what they had lived through? What organism produced them — its colours and sufferings — what it fed on — how it meant — what it felt like to fuel a body, to be an organ, pumping blood, moving the nutrients around, clearing waste, attempting to balance the humours. Every part with its specific function. Parsing as a kind of augury — dismember the language to see how it works, what it means. Examine the examen! In fact, the Latin origins of *essay* — *exagium*,

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18 William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* (London: Scott, Webster, and Geary, 1842), IV.1.20

19 Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon* (London: Continuum, 2005), p.17.

the scale, from *exigare*, to weigh — are proximate to *examen*, which is both the needle on the beam of a scale and a swarm of bees, or a flock of birds.[20]

Indeed, essays are a collection of individual points of reference, between which we draw lines to connect sometimes disparate meaning — the veins of the organism — a constellation — a heavenly body! Of course, the stars have been there all along, but you need to know just how and where to look in order to decipher their combinations, to find the points of meaning amidst the vastness. And, while we examine the same sky, what you and I — he — she — they — see will necessarily be different.

During the three years of research that went into producing this body of work, I consumed so many essays that my notes sometimes seemed to pulse with an anxiety of influence, a glut of voices, styles, and approaches necessarily as varied as the writers who produced them. Determining my *own* voice, style, and approach — sensibilities, *affinities* — meant listening to who and what was yelling the loudest, and discarding many of the rest.

It felt like a sacrifice at times, because — like the mind — the essay is greedy and desirous: it wants everything. But every act of making, of producing knowledge, involves decisions about inclusion and exclusion. And my project has never been to study or explain the essay, as has so often been deemed antithetical to its fundamental nature. It is, rather, to understand how the essay might be practiced in order to describe, to form representations — incarnations! embodiments! — of works of art. To propose that writing through a particular approach is research in itself: a test, a weighing, a trial. An experiment in the possibilities of form and structure. An argument with the self — an analysis of one's own knowledge and experience.

Style strives to reach a maximal intensity, expressing and evoking a meaning and experience that could otherwise not be expressed and evoked.[21]

Form — prose — grammar — syntax — the practice of language contains an argument within itself: research, critical thought, a series of careful decisions. The writing acts as

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20 Jean Starobinski, 'From "Can One Define the Essay?', in *Essayists on the Essay*, ed. by Carl H. Klaus and Ned Stuckey-French (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), p.110.

21 T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and Individual Talent', in *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, ed. by Joseph Black [et al.] (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2010), p. 84.

both evidence and occasion for the bringing of new work into existence. In order to prove this, to truly *essay*, rather than detail a hypothetical writing practice, I had to do it — to show and to tell at the same time.

The essay is by definition idiosyncratic, full of subjective versus objective influences, and each essayist has her own particular methods of collection and assembly. At one point, I took to writing phrases — those of others, as well as my own — on pieces of paper that I would fold and put in my pocket, carry around, finger the creases, fold and refold in idle moments. Although they were hallowed to me, tiny prayers, many times I forgot about them and, emptying the wash, would find scraps of paper — soaked and dried, torn and soft, like felt, with words faded and at odd angles. Though if you looked carefully, some were still legible:

Praise

Say it

Floorboar—

Line of

beau—

SURVIV

I lay them out on my desk and tried to rearrange them in as many different configurations as possible. It didn't amount to anything much — but it was a reminder of the value of chance. That we understand systems and structures, modes and methodologies of making better when, subject to moments of human error, they dissolve — fall to pieces — and yet somehow still remain intact.

In carne — in meat — the body of which here, like any piece of writing, is an incarnation. The meat, the flesh hangs from the bones, the form from the structure to make sure it comes to life just so —

Like any essayist, any researcher, I can offer only this very particular body that I was able to put together from the material through which I dug — the knowledge I was able to exhume. I sometimes imagined myself as a sort of Dr. Frankenstein figure — waiting for

the right pieces, the final limbs and organs, the current, the shock required to stimulate the body, so I could watch it rise slowly from the table and turn to meet me — its maker.

And there was certainly a kind of mad hope to the essaying — an insatiable hunger: I was *voracious*. I couldn't seem to stop either consuming or producing words. One night, I dreamt that a group of people was trying to force me to eat part of a human body. I don't think I understood their motives, all I remember is that the room was bare, with scorch marks on the wooden floor, and a promise hanging heavy in the air — if I conceded, I would gain an otherwise impossible understanding, I would be transformed. But what *part* of the body is it, I kept asking. As if that somehow made a difference, made it easier to bear the knowledge of this keen, dangerous tip of hunger.

There is a Eucharistic quality to research: we try to understand things completely by consuming as much of them as possible — incorporating their substance into ourselves, piece by piece. In the essay, not just objects and subjects are consumed, but the self, too, is cannibalised as a potential source of nourishment — an auto cannibalism. Often, without thinking, I found myself offering up — sacrificing for consumption — pieces of myself, of other people in my life, things that had been very meaningful to me — things I wasn't sure I even understood. I sat at my desk and watched calmly as my pen walked them up to the block, one by one.

It felt like a reasonable exchange, a responsibility: for what else could I give to the things that I was writing about, these things that I had come to love? I wanted to meet them halfway, so that I wasn't simply extracting meaning from them for my own purposes, fixing their specimens to the page. I didn't want writing to feel like murder, and process like a kind of betrayal — premeditated — a *plotting*. I wanted to sit at the same table as my subjects, subject to the same scrutiny and judgment. And together, we could be honoured guests before the execution.

Understanding in the encounter with the text begins as an effort to reconstruct the experience of questioning from which the text has arisen.[22]

It has been noted that the essay, historically, arose in a period of profound doubt, and that — as a form — its rhetoric has subsequently 'been adapted by authors who have

[22] Hans Georg Gadamer, as cited in Spellmeyer, Kurt, 'A Common Ground: The Essay in the Academy', *College English*, 51.3 (1989), p.273.

sensed the power of the forces of dissolution'.[23] The essay is not just a reckoning with external forces of change or movement, but also those that occur within the self during the process of doing so. It is a literary form that reflects on the process of combining knowledge, experience, and observation — an enactment of the process of accommodation between the world and the 'I' — an essaying to be.

And so the essay entails a wilful, radical loss of certainty, and an embrace of conflict. It accepts and interrogates the self, as well as language in general, in equal measure. The essay evokes authoritative texts for affirmation and denial, it juxtaposes sources that confirm, complicate, and contradict each other in form and content, substance and style. The essay knows that language registers the way we perceive things, not the things themselves. It is for this reason that so many essays involve writing *about* writing.

Fullness of soul can sometimes overflow in utter vapidity of language, for none of us can ever express the exact measure of his needs or his thoughts or his sorrows; and human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to, while we long to make music that will melt the stars.[24]

Montaigne writes of the essay as *cette sotte entreprise* — this foolish business. And yet he spent most of his life producing them — always essaying — trying to make sense of life *through* writing.

As I altered my syntax, I altered my intellect.[25]

Every practice that is worth something involves an element of foolishness; putting something at stake means the possibility of great gains as well as great losses. Love, for instance. Faith. Hope. Knowledge. None of these come without sacrifices — deals — bargaining. In the essay, there is a point, but there is no even keel, no straight line, story, explanation. As Barthes wrote, 'how to draw a line that is not stupid? It is not enough to undulate it a little to make it a living thing: you must…make it *gauche*: there is always a little gaucherie in intelligence.'[26]

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23 O.B. Hardison Jr., 'Binding Proteus: An Essay on the Essay', *The Sewanee Review*, 96.4 (1988), p.625.

24 Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2011), p.146.

25 W.B. Yeats, 'An Introduction for My Plays', *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats: Volume II, The Plays*, ed. by David R. Clark and Rosalind E. Clark (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), p.180.

26 Roland Barthes, 'Cy Twombly: Works on Paper', in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p.160.

Each slip of the pen, then, even if it produces grievous distortions of the form intended, is necessarily incorporated in intelligent trajectory. The useful line, the seeking, essaying line writhes, seethes, courses, bulges, shudders — does not — cannot — will not — stop. It might take longer to arrive, it might seem an unconventional route to some, but you get to see more along the way.

I think of Georgia O'Keefe, who said of her home in New Mexico, 'I had nothing but to walk into nowhere and the wide sunset space with the star.'[27] Perhaps, as Thoreau wrote, we are all 'parcel[s] of vain strivings'. But if you allow yourself a broad enough expanse, you can walk *however you want*. You can weave all over the place, look up, look down, lie on the ground — face the sky, face the earth. You can wait until the sun sets and it grows cold and there is an ache in your jaw. The star will always be there — pulling you towards it, even when you think you can't see a single thing out in the dark night sky.

It is only personal weakness that makes us content with what others or we ourselves have found out in the hunt for knowledge. An abler man will not rest content with it. There is always room for a successor, yes, and for ourselves, and a road in another direction.[28]

I think I'm okay with gaucherie and foolishness — bargaining — sacrifice — failure — doubt — a state of eternal incompletion — *sketchiness*.

Because essaying *will* destroy you, it will break your heart. But, at the end of it all, you may find it doesn't matter, because a new one has grown in its place.

– August, 2015

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27 Georgia O'Keefe, as cited in Joan Didion, 'Georgia O'Keefe', *The White Album* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), p.130.

28 Michel de Montaigne, 'Of experience', *The Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, trans. by Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), p.818.

ANA MENDIETA,
LABYRINTH OF VENUS, **1982**

…before we join these others, I privately say unto you, old friend (unto you, really, I'm afraid), please accept from me this unpretentious bouquet of early blooming parentheses: ((((()))). I suppose, most unflorally, I truly mean them to be taken, first off, as bowlegged – buckle-legged – omens of my state of mind and body at this writing.

J.D. Salinger, *Seymour, an Introduction*

The Bluffs #1.

The essay should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last. It must draw its curtain around us, but it must be a curtain that shuts us in, not out.[29]

Does writing things make them happen? Does it put the seeds into your mind, deep down, so that you don't notice? So that later, one day, without even thinking or meaning to, you open your mouth to speak, maybe just to *breathe*, and a vine unfurls, thick with flowers and thorns, buds and barbs, and this vine tumbles forth uncontrollably to ensconce you. Roses, bracken, heather: the sharp graceless things, the thorny singular truths that issue from within. Until you stretch like the ground beneath to support them. You are fertile. You are a good host. And even though it suffocates, you harbour the organic matter until it is incorporated, until you cannot remember any differently.

I want to make claims for agency, for logic, for reason—for rational rationale. But a big part, the biggest part of me believes that something else is at play, has the upper hand, the winning hand, the *only* hand. That a different kind of balance hangs in the balance. After a time, paying such close attention to words and narrative, everything begins to feel like a rehearsal of inevitability, both on and off the page. I observe life to write about it; I write to understand life; I transpose the writing back into my own behaviour in the living world. Sometimes word for word. A word for a word.

(I'll trade you.)

The essay should lay us under a spell.

Woolf's exhortation is in part a reaction to the prevailing essayistic practices of her day, which she felt had forsaken the essay form in favour of a kind of journalism.[30] But it is also an appeal to style, the power of the word, the primacy of syntax: how language operates on the mind and imagination, its ability to enlighten and to produce pleasure.

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29 Woolf, Virginia, 'The Modern Essay', in *Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.13.

30 Later in the same essay, Woolf expounds, 'the habitual essayist must skim the surface of the thought and dilute the strength of personality'(Ibid., p.19.). W.H. Auden felt similarly, deploring the conservative strictures placed upon the form in popular print: 'Today tastes have changed…we can no longer derive any pleasure from the kind of essay which is a fantasia upon whatever chance thoughts may come into the essayist's head.' W.H. Auden, 'G.K. Chesterton's Non-Fictional Prose', in *Gilbert Keith Chesterton: A Half Century of Views*, ed. by D.J. Conlon (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 263.

Woolf's own essays, like her fiction, luxuriate in dazzling language and wheeling shifts in perspective, move seamlessly from interior to exterior to compose poignant and carefully achieved observations.

The essay doesn't record or transcribe the subject or object at hand.

The essay investigates, it lavishes and loathes in equal measure, it asks questions and expects no answers. The essay encounters hurdles and impasses, but it is never ashamed; it finds a way around. The essay digs deep and comes up on the other side gasping for air, but exclaiming at the beauty of the sky. The essay has something at stake, the essay desires, even if at times it isn't quite sure what. The essay believes, blindly.

The essay falters. The essay presses on.
The essay is not a document, it is a process.

It is a process in which the self, the subjective voice, is intricately, intractably bound.

But I still believe that the unexamined life is not worth living: and I know that self-delusion, in the service of no matter what small or lofty cause, is a price no writer can afford. His subject is himself and the world and it requires every ounce of stamina he can summon to attempt to look on himself and the world as they are.[31]

Perhaps it is a strange calling, the desire to cast the essay's particular, idiosyncratic spell: the directions are unclear, the ingredients change, and sometimes it simply doesn't work. Perhaps it is not for the faint of heart. Perhaps some days, sitting at your desk, staring at a blank sheet of paper, it is hard to believe in *magic*.

James Baldwin refers to the essay as a process of discovery, a means to confront 'the accumulated rock of the ages'[32] — the stalwart mass that breaks tools and scars hands, that keeps him captive. For Baldwin, identity depends on being able to decipher and to describe the rock: 'it was necessary to challenge and claim the rock. Otherwise the rock claimed me.'[33]

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31 James Baldwin, 'Introduction', *Nobody Knows My Name* (London: Penguin, 1991), p.ii.

32 James Baldwin, 'Preface to the 1984 Edition', *Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Dial Press), p.3.

33 Ibid, p.3.

Spells and rocks.

Runes, yes. *These fragments I have shored against my ruin.*[34]

It all comes out in bits and pieces. I'm always getting ahead of myself. The thoughts, the connections happen faster than you can get them down, don't they? What I want to say is that every writer, every person, has a rock and voice and a language and a style and maybe even more than one, maybe many too many to count. And whether I would call myself an essayist or not, I want to find my rock, I want to know my age: I want to claim them, I want to be ready when they come for me.

Ana Mendieta, *Untitled earth-body work (Labyrinth of Venus)*, 1982, (Scarborough Bluffs, Ontario), 35mm colour slide

It jumps out at me from the book. I studied Mendieta briefly during my undergraduate degree. I mean *very* briefly. We had one module on 'Feminist Art', roughly 7 to 12 minutes of a much longer lecture, in which the professor monotone-droned through a cursory list of female artists from the 1960s-70s.

The implication seemed to be, yawn, that all of them participate in the same vein of work, the same aesthetic and conceptual content, by virtue of gender alone. The lines of Art History proper — cue the categories: feminist, outsider, black, queer, etc. — are old as boots. And yet each time, it is a surprise when they sidle up to the bar, dripping with forced and obvious charm, asking for your number. Remember to practise your rejoinder so you are never caught off guard, so you can say calmly, firmly — thanks, but no, *honey*, I'm not in the mood. Remind yourself that just because you can name or describe something, doesn't mean that you own it.

Something about Mendieta always stuck in my mind. I can still hear the professor, mid dead-float stream: 'women trying to figure out how to address the body' — [Janine Antoni slide, *Lick and Lather*] —'self-representation' — [Hannah Wilke slide, *Starification Series*] — 'figuring the female body and its biological processes' — [Carolee Schneemann

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34 T.S. Eliot, 'V. What the Thunder Said', *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, ed. by Joseph Black [et al.] (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2010), p.83.

slide, *Interior Scroll*]: click, change, click, change, click, change. 'Finally, some artists removed the body entirely' — [Ana Mendieta slide, *Silueta* (with red powder)].

Do you ever hear words, names — of places, people, books, etc. — and feel like you already know them, though you are almost 100% sure it's not possible that you do? An intuition, a sensibility or a texture, an *affinity* reaches out and connects to something in you that it recognizes, like a magnetic plug and socket? It happens to me. Not often, but when it does: oh boy, does it. I hear names of things and I repeat them to myself. I know you, I think. *I know you*. Like rolling smooth pebbles in your hand; or that piece of folded paper in your pocket that you crease and finger while you walk. Like a clean dive off a high board — no splash, barely a ripple. I know you. *I* know *you*, it says back. And you can hear it, you can feel it, pulling at your sleeve, tugging at your veins.

You don't have to believe me. I'm just saying.

I'm saying that the *Silueta* was burned into my mind. *Silueta en Fuego*. Silhouette on fire. Is it true that burning is the most extreme form of dematerialisation? The most absolute dissolution of matter? Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. Never air to air. Or water to water, though it makes up — what do they say — 85% of the human body? I guess the skin gets in the way, keeps everything from evaporating.

At the time, I didn't think much of it — the affinity — the resonance. Instead, I wrote papers about the more macho land artists of the same period: Michael Heizer's *City*, James Turrell's *Roden Crater*, Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. Then, as now, I was transfixed by the romance of the infinite, of the impossible sublime. Similar themes cropped up in papers for other classes: the unrealised, the objectless, the in-between, the immaterial, 'the absence of presence'[35], the incomplete, the boundless. Papers on Da Vinci's unfinished works and the progression of the 'deluge' drawings in his notebooks. The different blacks of Caravaggio portraits. Malevich's years of silence. Van Gogh, painting himself into and then out of the groves of olives trees, how they twist and gnarl in his absence.

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35 Victor Burgin, 'The Absence of Presence', in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 1097-1101.

Always this fascination with the insubstantial. And with it, a hint of the myth, the ritual, the icon, the holy abstraction. Not to mention the obsessive compulsive.

Was this the element of Mendieta's work that reached out and grabbed me, plunging its fingers into the soft clay at my centre, leaving a trail of muddy handprints behind? The intangible. Ritual. The feeling of wanting to enter something entirely, to sink into it, to be immersed. To go inside the heart of the earth, the sky, the water. To make work that bleeds, burns, explodes.

Years later — a different decade, a different continent — and Mendieta returns, she rises to the surface. I am browsing art books on Charing Cross Road, and when I pull a heavy book on Bruce Nauman's video pieces off the shelf, it dislodges a slender adjacent volume that I manage to catch before it falls to the floor. *Ana Mendieta: A Book of Works*.[36] It is about a series of pieces she made in 1981, in Escaleras de Jaruco, Jaruca State Park, just outside of Havana, Cuba. Eight works in total — 'Rupestrian Sculptures' — large figures carved into the cliff and cave walls within a certain area of the park. Like many of what she called her 'earth-body works', they loosely resemble or make reference to both ancient maternal figures, as well as some of the softer, fleshier folds of female anatomy. Some are more human in form or outline, while others are labyrinthine abstractions that curve and circle around a central opening, like a door or a keyhole that might open right into the wall of the cave. As though it is possible — through an act of making, effort, presence, labour — to enter the earth itself, to become one with its fleshy caverns and corporeal openings. A journey to the centre of the earth.

W.B. Yeats, like Woolf, believed in the idea of form as a kind of spell. The essay as an aesthetic ritual that joins symbols, minds, and memories into a whole, that uses language and rhythm to weave diversities into a convincing web.[37]

Scholars have speculated, sometimes heavy-handedly, that the resonance of the 'maternal', or a 'place of origin' is key to understanding this piece, as Mendieta had been exiled from Cuba — her homeland — early in life.

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36 Ana Mendieta, *Ana Mendieta: A Book of Works*, ed. by Bonnie Clearwater (Miami: Grassfield Press, 1993)

37 Charles O'Neill, 'The Essay as Aesthetic Ritual: WB Yeats and *Ideas of Good and Evil*', in *Essays on the Essay: Redefining the Genre*, ed. by Alexander J. Butrym (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989)

What does it mean, the origin of something? How far back do we go, and can we ever be sure that we have found the real, true beginning?

In *A Book of Works*, in between photo etchings of the 'Rupestrian Sculptures', there are facsimiles of Mendieta's sketches and handwritten research notes about the origin myths of the Taina, the indigenous people of the area.

They captured the woodpecker, which in their tongue is called Inriri. And taking the women who had no sex, they bound their hands and feet and tied the bird to their bodies. The woodpecker began the work it is accustomed to do, pecking and piercing in the place where the sex of women is ordinarily located.

They believe that there is a place where the dead go that is called Coaybay and it is located at one side of the island which is called Soraya.

At night they go amongst the living. They stroll and eat certain fruit named guayaba. To recognize them they touch their stomachs because they say that the dead have no navel. If they don't find one they say he is operito.[38]

If they don't find one, they say he is operito. *Operito*. Smooth, like a pebble in the hand.

At the library, I read more about Mendieta — stacks and stacks of books.

There was a lot I didn't know about her work.

That it was bold, tough, physical work. That it was take-no-prisoners about what it wanted, what it meant. That she defined herself by an ethos and artistic credo that sought to unite life and work. It had to do with: blood, the body, the earth—violence, life, death, ritual, the occult, embodiment, belonging, exile, transubstantiation, impermanence. The body. The soul.

About her life.

That it was fruitful and full of life and personality and shit-talking people and pushing their buttons and stirring things up. Something dynamic that people described as 'fiery' — she was 'fiery'. *Silueta en Fuego*. That she wrote happy postcards to friends from the places she travelled. She was excited about her work, fuelled by an energy, a force to

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38 Mendieta, *A Book of Works*, pp.30-31.

create. What do they say, 'full of life' — she was full of life, *con brio*! Until she wasn't anymore. Because life is sometimes brief.

About her death.

That it divided the New York art world. That it still makes people angry. That the case files are sealed until after Carl Andre — her husband at the time, as well as chief (and only) suspect — is deceased. That many people as a result wish him so prematurely. That many people come to his defence. That Frank Stella paid his bail. That during the trial, he sat in the courtroom calmly reading the newspaper. That only he knows whether Mendieta jumped or was pushed from the 34th floor apartment they shared on Mercer Street. Where he still lives. On the 34th floor. A long way up. A long way down.

It becomes difficult to understand or address any of these things without understanding or addressing all of these things. Which seems unjust and limiting – to her – to me – to everyone. All of the details, circumstances, and speculations have been trampled over and parsed to shit. People have identity-politicked the hell out of it in a way that makes me want to never ever leave anything behind. The world, human beings, the violence of what we want and what we need and what we need to believe—in the present, in memoriam: it takes hold and refuses to unlatch, unclasp, ungrasp. Fingernails tear and bleed, a mastication to the death of whatever is at hand. We will render it.

She is operito.

Operito.

The voice is what's really at stake in modernity, the voice as specific substance of language everywhere triumphantly pushed forward.[39]

The 18th century (British) essayists — Samuel Johnson, Addison & Steele, Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt — understood the importance of voice. Their legacy to the form can be seen as a case study in persona as textual quality: how it is possible to veer wildly in mood and tone, while still endearing yourself to the reader by participating in a notion of

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[39] Roland Barthes, 'Lesson in Writing', in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p.175.

intellectual respect and communion. Indeed, there is a relationship between role-playing and essay writing. The essay is where public self and private self collide, a delicate negotiation — as in any relationship, any meeting of minds. You can give away some, but not all of the dirt. You can go dark, but not pitch black. Counter the weight with some levity, why don't you; tell a joke or two.

Mendieta travelled widely to make her works. For each location, she did extensive research, scrutinising the national, cultural, and geological history of each site. Some areas she returned to many times. Iowa, where she went to art school. Upstate New York. Mexico. There was something about these places, what they held.

Maybe it was a practical decision, too. Maybe the earth was soft, fecund, easy to manipulate. In Mexico, there were already tombs, so she didn't have to dig much. And of course, ruins are full of import.

There is a picture of her at Stonehenge, where she travelled on a visit to England from Italy, where she spent a year on fellowship at the American Academy in Rome. She stands within one of the trilithons, arms outstretched, palms flat to the bluestones on either side.

I am surprised to see that Mendieta made an 'earth-body' work in Canada. In Scarborough, a suburb outside of Toronto. In 1982, an organisation called 'The Guild' invited her to the Scarborough Bluffs park — a long stretch of green, cliffs and rocky beach along the northern shore of lake Ontario.

The Labyrinth of Venus. Although Mendieta kept detailed notes and sketchbooks, journals, wrote postcards to friends, fastidiously documented her process, including applications for grants and projects, it is difficult to find much information about the work. Just, again and again: 'She visited Toronto, Ontario, at the invitation of the Guild, Guildwood Hall, and carved two life-sized figures into the Scarborough Bluffs.'

The Labyrinth of Venus.

I keep staring at the photocopy of the work that I made from a book called *Unseen Mendieta.*

A large figure on its side, in three parts. At the left is its head, a small, roughly circular, depression in the rock. The upper body follows, the middle segment, a large circle inscribed by a deep gouge. It has not been hollowed out like the head. Save the gouging line, it remains even with the surface of the surrounding bluff. Then, the last, the largest, the longest section, the lower body. An oval with pointed ends that lies length-wise, with its left point poking into the fleshy abdomen of the figure's torso. Like the head, it has been hollowed out to a depth of — I would guess — six inches. Only not entirely. About two hand-widths in from its border, a concentric oval of rock remains raised — like the upper body, it is even with the natural rock-face, its depth unaltered. Inside it, another concentric oval has been carved out, at the centre of the lower body. The centre of the Labyrinth. An opening into the flesh of this earth-body, an aperture peering inwards to the deep strata of rock beyond.

If you didn't know its history or title, you might think it was an ancient eye, half-open, winking in the Bluffs. Maybe it is a tear that bulges out of its inner corner, or some kind of bulbous growth. A fossil, maybe. A mysterious creature of the Pleistocene era, frozen; the vestiges of an ancient geologic age, deeply embedded.

Embedded in the Bluffs.

And, of course, the figure as a whole also resembles the female sex. In which case, the tear at the corner is instead a small bud that bulges and swells with desire, and the pupil of the eye is the centre of a centre that gazes, opens, invites into a different kind of depth.

The Bluffs.

Crease the paper, finger its folds, press it between your finger tips. Feel the corner where it has been rubbed soft like felt. Press your finger to her lips — *shhhhh. She is asleep.*

I find an email address for The Guild, and I write to ask if they have any more information. I have so many questions — mostly practical ones about location and scale. There are no people in any of the photographs, so it is impossible to tell how big the labyrinth really is, how long it might have taken to construct. I say that I want to come visit, that I want, that I *need* to see it: The Labyrinth, the Venus. Goddess of the rocks. Pleistocene eye of the earth-body.

No one replies. After a while, it feels like maybe I'm imagining everything, and I have to keep checking the book to make sure that the piece is real, that it exists. It existed. Every night, I dream that it is being washed away a little bit — eroded by waves that crash against the face of the cliff. Some nights the water is calm and they lap and murmur at the shore, unthreatening. Other nights it is stormy, tempestuous, and the waves collide with the rock like a solid mass, sand-papering Mendieta's markings, erasing them almost entirely. The form of the woman grows fainter and fainter.

The Bluffs.

I think about running my hands through the grooves in the rock-face, palms flat against the rough, moving with their gentle curves. How big are they, the depressions? How flat? How wide? I imagine that the central oval of the lower body is the length of two forearms. If you were in front of the figure, you could lay your forearms across it end to end, like you were about to push through, to enter the labyrinth.

He was the less visible of the two and was searching for a magic formula, a possible handle to grasp, the real mind of the mind, the missing piece, perhaps only a small one, that would close the broken circle.[40]

In my mind, in my notes, in the air, on the page, Mendieta begins to merge with the essay. The practice, the process — the *essaying*. I worry that it is a kind of violence, that I am turning Mendieta and her work, this work, *into* the essay. A demented, grasping alchemy. Like so many others, am I using her as a tool to understand or to address something else? Writing, for instance. Desire. The self. *Myself*.

Maybe. But it's true that Mendieta thought, and *I* think, that we know certain things inherently, that we can intuit combinations, layouts, shared properties. That creative

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40 Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, trans. by Sophie Wilkins (London: Picador, 2011), p. 164.

mediation provides access to different kinds of truths, though they may remain in flux. And there is something about the essay and about Mendieta — taken together and apart — that seems like a gift: they connect, they glance at each other sidelong.

I don't have anyone to ask, to make sure it's not just me that sees these things. Most of the time though, I think it doesn't matter. I think I am half in love with the essay and the other half with the labyrinth. I think that you don't have to work so hard *all* of the time to deserve subjectivity. I think that the split between the life and the page is where we perform an idea of responsibility not just to others, but to ourselves. As Thoreau wrote, 'We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my existence.'[41]

Wherever you go, there you are!

Or, to return to Woolf, valiant introspective:

Never to be yourself and yet always – that is the problem.[42]

I write to the Guild again, but there is only silence. I will be in Canada for the summer, so maybe I can go to Scarborough, I can find the Guild; and even if not, I can just go to the park and walk along the shore until I find it — until I find the *Labyrinth of Venus*.

Yes, this is what I will do. Sometimes you just have to go and see for yourself.

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41 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings*, ed. by Joseph Wood Krutch (New York: Bantam, 1962), p.113.

42 Virginia Woolf, 'The Modern Essay', in *The Common Reader: First Series*, 5th edn (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), p. 275.

The Escarpment.

Just the sound of it peels the skin the scalp right off your skull, sliced with a sharp-edged, thin-skinned, double keen whet blade knife. Bald, cut, rocky, exposed.

'That's where your aunt lives', she tells me, 'out there on the Escarpment. It's a strange place, you know. *Strange* things happen. Her friend Winnie — I've told you about her, haven't I?'

'No', I say, 'no, you haven't.'

'She had terrible asthma, and she was also agoraphobic. One day she had to leave the house, to drive somewhere — I can't remember why, but it was an emergency — maybe she needed more asthma medication. Anyways, she was out there in her car driving those long, straight roads through the fields and vineyards — you remember how it feels like they stretch on forever. Well she had a panic attack, and then an asthma attack, and then she died. Right then and there. They found her not so far from home, pulled over by the side of the road. Just staring out the window, unblinking, dead.'

'You mean', I ask, 'you mean that it — all the straight lines and the wide open spaces — they — killed…'

'No', she says, 'no, she had *asthma*.'

'Oh, right — yes, you said.'

She pauses.

'Now I know you're gathering material for something — but I've been saving this in my notes, I might use it for a story someday.'

'Okay', I say, 'OK.'

I say it without conviction, knowing that my version, that *every* version, is different.

The escarpment.

The *cuesta*.

Erosions and volcanic rifts, deep basins and steep cliffs.

In my version, I know that it was the landscape, the clean-cut lines and the endless reach.

It was the landscape that scared her. It scared her to death.

Kinds of water drown us. Kinds of water blister the negatives irremediably (prints look burned). Perhaps I will have time to put these through again later.[43]

Naming.

North America loves naming. But it always get it a bit wrong somehow, in a way that reveals the sadness of naming in general — the big expectations — the even bigger gap between the original and the replica, the signifier and the signified.

Witness:

Savile Row, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. A narrow alley behind a shopping centre that lies to the west of the city. You might only stumble across it while exploring the outer parking reaches on a particularly busy Saturday.

Jamaica, New York. Popular with JFK Airport overnight layovers; travellers dine nervously in low lit local Italian restaurants otherwise populated by what might vaguely approximate a cast for The Real Life Sopranos of Queens.

We know about Paris, Texas, but what about Paris, Maine? Blink and you'll miss it.

We are always passing through places we have already been, places we want to go someday, places we might never get to. Some areas of the world, some geographies are littered with them. Of course *something* has to come first — to *be* the first, the original. And it helps to make sense of things if there's a story, an origin — a point against which to compare similarities and differences. Only, I can't decide if it's comforting or lonely, the radical divisibility of nomenclature.

On the way to the Five Finger Lakes, upstate New York, I bought a guide book. Most of its photographs have water of some sort pouring out of or over rocks of some sort. Where does it all come from? America has always seemed like this to me: impossibly abundant, full of space and all variety of profusions. Big promises. Colonies of dreams. Proud lists of places that I have ambitions but no real plans to visit.

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[43] Anne Carson, 'Kinds of Water: An Essay on the Road to Compostela', in *Plainwater* (New York: Vintage, 2000), p. 141.

Taughanock Falls.
Buttermilk Falls.
Lucifer Falls!
(No kidding).
Pratts Falls.
(Tell me about it).

My guidebook has a section about the places you can anchor your boat and refuel, etc. 'Marina's', it is called. Does she watch over all of them, sweet Marina? Marina, harbour my vessel, port in a storm. Marina, you smell of nutmeg and will you serve me a piece of cherry pie, will you serve me the sky, as we sit and watch the waters crashing around us?

On the map, the lakes appear to me as stretch marks, as though the earth beneath — and whatever is beneath that earth — shifted, turned, pressed upwards, exerting force to tauten and expand its skin; leaving behind small but sure cracks along its surface, which the water rushed in to fill. The earth here is full of water. It doesn't like to leave things empty. I compare the lakes to the stretch marks on my hip, right by the bone. Thin, shiny slivers of white that appeared at some point when I either grew or shrank faster than my skin could accommodate, and a different kind of skin rushed in to fill the empty spaces. They have faded over time, and are less visible in certain lights. But I know that they are always there: a record, in the flesh, of what happens when we expand and contract.

Five Finger Lakes is something of a misnomer, as there are, in fact, eleven lakes. Twelve if you count the outlying Oneida Lake, sometimes referred to as the thumb. Seneca Lake, at the centre of the splay, is the middle finger, *extended.*

Who has 11 fingers, never mind 12? But the trope is a good one, so full of earthy tactility. Cool water against the skin. Perhaps there are 10 normal fingers for all of the normal finger things — holding, carrying, waving, interlacing. And the 11th is special — it fingers on its own — it points, anoints. It grazes and caresses, it marks and preordains. It rasps — dirt under the nails.

Only — the fingers don't rise up, they gouge down. The lakes are valleys, they are depressions, as though something has been removed, not added. I wonder, was the

earth-person who made these pointing downwards, pushing to the south — or facing upwards, pulling away from the north? *Being* pulled, maybe. Being *dragged*, maybe. Yes, the earth-person had been clinging onto the globe with all of her might, curling her body around it like a foetus, when someone grabbed her by the ankles and started to heave. Or maybe she only *thought* she didn't want to leave the north, because she worried she might fall off if she slid too far down — she might lose her balance and topple tipple spill into space and beyond. We all feel that way sometimes, don't we? It's true that, in objective terms, gravity sounds like a spell that might lose its hold at any moment. But sometimes the truth is that we are simply reluctant to admit that a moment has ended, is over, and it's time to move on — we just need a little — nudge —

So the lakes, the fingers, are a noun and not a verb. They merely *look* like fingers — a geographical homunculus —as opposed to the marks that fingers make. The impressions, the traces humans leave behind.

The Iroquois tribe, in fact, understood them to be the hand of the Great Spirit, describing their home by saying that they lived upon the hand of Gitchy Manitou.

Then the Americans came and gave them a five finger discount. Parcelled the land to pieces. New names, counties, borders. Land commissioners reached into a different past to christen the sites, sprinkling the region with classical appellations: Hannibal, Lysander, Camillus, Pompey; Ulysses, Homer, Solon, Romulus; Dryden, Milton, Locke.

One book I read referred to the Fingers Lakes as 'unequivocal exclamations', as though they are punctuations (exclamations! exhortations!) that comment on the surrounding regions.

So much water!
So close to home!!
Under the bridge!!!
And so on!!!!

And what would they have to say about the neighbouring towns, with their strange constellations of ancient, foreign, and native names.

Ovid, Romulus! Lodi; Burdett: Scipio? Genoa! Dresden!!

Vertical organization is also possible.[44]

Dresden!!
Genoa!
Scipio?
Burdett:
Lodi;
Romulus!
Ovid,
etc. etc. etc.

etc.
etc.
etc.

At one point the region was referred to as the 'Burned-Over District', because of the degree to which it was swept by a fiery religious fervour. Revivalists, Millenialists, and Evangelists fermented to produce the Church of Latter Day Saints — the Mormons.

Inland Empire, it was called, too. The Storm Country.

In the autumn of 1869, a man named Cyrus Reed Teed — self-professed alchemist and eclectic physician — shocked himself with enough current that he believed he had died and been transformed into the new incarnation of God. He took a new name, calling himself Koresh, the Hebrew form of Cyrus, and formed a religion known as Koreshanty. He gathered converts from all over the Finger Lakes area. Central to this faith was a version of the hollow earth theory: believers maintained that they were living on the inside rather than the outside of the earth. Were it not so, surely they would have fallen off long ago.

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44 Donald Barthelme, 'The Indian Uprising', in *Sixty Stories* (London: Penguin, 2003), p.106

In the same year, David Hannum of Homer was responsible for planting the Cardiff Giant, the supposedly ancient, petrified remains of a titan that fooled many. Circus man P.T. Barnum made a copy and made a mint.

Somehow I never knew that the head and foot of a lake aren't determined by what part of it is at the top or bottom, more northern or southern, but by the direction in which the water flows. I always assumed that polar orientation was the determinant — as though all lakes would head north and foot south: bodies standing, neatly arranged. Not registering how easily direction can be reversed, how simple it is to turn something on its head.

Vertical organisation is also possible.

The 'head' is the side nearest the source, from which water pours into the lake. The 'foot' is the side nearest the basin, into which the lake empties that water. It seems self-evident. Something would pour into your head, down through your body, and out through your feet, wouldn't it? Nothing flows upward in the opposite direction. Except a whirlpool. Or blood.

I bought the guidebook, I did this research, I know all of these things because I am going to Geneva, which sits at the *head* of Seneca Lake, that rigid middle finger. According to an Iroquois tale, an enormous serpent once spanned the entire area that would later become New York State. It blocked the hunters' route to the north, while allowing game to leap over its back and escape. During a time of starvation, a young brave strung a magic bow and pierced the serpent at its centre. The creature flung itself into the air and split in two: its tail became Seneca Lake, and its head — lying just to the east — became Cayuga Lake. Some legends say the waters are inhabited by a dragon, while others claim they are patrolled by a giant mermaid.

There are ghost stories about the drowned, who do not reappear, but remain trapped beneath the frigid waters of the lakes, forever. Sometimes, booming sounds can be heard echoing across the hills. They call it the 'lake drums', signals of lost lovers looking for each as they roam through the land, an eternally unrequited call and answer. On one of my maps, there is a long, wavering line marked by P P P P P (and on and on). Not

thinking that it of course marked a pass of some sort, I had quaintly imagined it to be a dynamic marking, as on a music score: pianissi-issi-issi-issi-issi-issi….mo. The hills are *not* alive with the sound of music. They beat with the softest, quietest, most sensitive of hearts, each P the location of drum after tiny love drum. *Shhhh. She's asleep.*

Though it has been declared impossible by geologists, many believe the lakes are connected. That between Seneca and Cayuga, the tail and the head of the serpent, there is a secret tunnel through which objects can pass. What objects, I wonder. Bottles with messages, crucial missives from head to tail? Or perhaps it is a conduit for the kind of essential body matter one might offer in terms of reconciliation – what needs to be shared in order to bind two halves into one: kidneys, liver, lungs, blood, guts, heart.

I will wait. When I arrive, I will look carefully, I will scrutinise. I will linger, I will abide. And when the times comes, I will see what rises to the surface.

I am in the lake, in the centre
of the picture, just under the surface.[45]

Full fathom five.[46]

I find myself testing myself — trying to see how much I can remember — spelling words forwards and then backwards — in and out of sequence —how many synonyms, how many different combinations can I come up with. My relative degree of success and failure seems of great import; I feel, deeply, that it is all — this language wrangling — a serious indicator of Something Bigger.

Synonyms.
Synonyms.
For a moment there I read symptoms.

I call him and say, 'hey guess where I am?'

'Where?', he asks.

'I'm in a ditch behind the hotel. In the middle of a construction site. It's the only place I could find to have a cigarette without anyone from the wedding party seeing. They all go running at 5am. I just don't want to have that conversation, you know? I had to borrow a lighter from the guy at the desk. He looked confused and asked, wasn't I with "those running people".'

He laughs.

I say, 'I had a dream last night. About the Apocalypse.'

He says, 'another one?'

'What — another dream or another Apocalypse?'

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45 Margaret Atwood, 'This is a photograph of me', in *Selected Poem, 1965-1975* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), p.8.

46 William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (London: Scott, Webster, and Geary, 1842), I.2.88.

'Both, I guess,' he pauses. What I will later recognise as the beginning of a widening gap, a pulling apart. Right now we are at about 50%, but the stakes will go up and then down — things will get cheaper — clearance sale — bargain basement deal.

'I mean, isn't it different every time?', he asks.

'A little bit. There was that same ominous feeling, the air was thick with dread. There was a group of girls that I was supposed to take care of — I needed to get them out of the city. I said, I know a guy who has a van, and when we showed up, it was you. After we drove off to make our escape, I got stopped by some people — they made us get out of the van. I couldn't save everyone. I lost some of my girls. I woke up with this terrible feeling.'

'It wasn't real', he says.

'It wasn't real', I say. Trying it out. Weighing the end with a full stop like his, rather than my usual rising inflection. But it doesn't make it feel any different.

I tell him about how we spent the day wine-tasting, driving around in a strange party minibus with a cooler and pleather benches and pulsating neon lights, like a 90s club bathroom. I tell him there was music playing that made me feel sad because it reminded me of being a teenager, and I try to describe the horrors of explaining to a bus full of mostly marketing professors and business professionals that you are writing a PhD about the essay — literally and figuratively — as art form. I tell him that the wine seemed to get worse instead of better, the more vineyards we went to, and isn't it supposed to be the other way around, and by mid-afternoon people were starting to look a little slumped and dishevelled, but they were happy at least and I couldn't figure out why I wasn't, and maybe it was that I had to keep biting my tongue so hard that I thought I was going to draw blood and at one vineyard I even spat the free wine *out* and pretended I had to go to the bathroom so I could go to a different area where you could order a real, full glass and just threw one back to – numb – and – dull – the –

I hear him laughing on the other end of the line. And it's true that it *is* funny. Or maybe comical is a better word. It is *comical*. I am surprised, though, since I thought I had been explaining how lonely it had felt.

Maybe I am always doing this. Turning things into entertainment. Who am I trying to make it easier for?

'Everything's a joke with you', he said.
'Nothing's a joke with me. It just all comes out like one.'[47]

The thing about having a good memory, see, is that you have to be careful what you make connections between. Some things — though you remember them in painstaking detail — are unrelated. They just happen to happen at the same time. They happen next to each other. Chronology can be misleading. We mistake it for narrative. And perhaps in turn mistake narrative for logic, sense, reason.

I go on, and he listens. Or at least I think he does. I *hope* he does. But I know, I have heard, that there are no guarantees in life.

I tell him about how at the end of the day we went to dinner, and I was stuck in the middle of the table—all the women at one end, drinking white wine spritzers and talking about their hair and earrings and how they wanted to look for the wedding, all the men at the other end, I kid you not, *swigging* bourbon and recounting gruesome tales of the bachelor party that seems to have involved a blow up doll that one of the groomsmen had his pregnant wife drive across town to pick up for them ahead of time because, I don't know, love knows no bounds. I tell him that I felt sad again, and alienated, and why am I always in that middle space, that in between place, neither here nor there, so hard to identify with either of these (granted limited) options of How To Be a Person.

He is laughing again. 'But Em', he says, 'you know you just have to let these things go, right? It's a wedding, you just have to do this stuff. You have to get your fake eyelashes and your manicure and your pedicure. You're a *woman*. Just enjoy it, enjoy yourself.'

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47 Lorrie Moore, 'The Jewish Hunter', in *Lorrie Moore: The Collected Stories* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), p. 443.

'But — but if *this* is being a *woman*, you see, I am not sure I am going to *make it*, through, the, rest, of, this, week — never mind the rest of life. My excuse for not going on a late night shopping trip to Walmart was that "I might kill someone", it just came out like that, and here I am in a ditch smoking cigarettes that I actually *stole* from — someone named Uncle Phil, I think. Do you hear what I'm saying? This is a really bad drag show, it is very unconvincing, this version of being a woman. It's cold and dirty, the ground is uneven and there is nowhere to sit, and I would least of all things describe it as…*enjoyable*.'

I can feel a kind of anger rising. Maybe it's the daytime drinking taking its toll — perhaps I am severely dehydrated. But maybe it's something else. And I'm not sure why I feel like I'm not really saying what it is that I want to, what I *should* be saying, because there are words coming out of my mouth and they have volume—but they are also participating in a kind of silence.

He starts to backtrack. 'Oh, I didn't mean — I mean — I meant — you know what I meant, it's that — I mean…Well, I'll be there tomorrow! You'll have someone normal to talk to. You won't be alone, I promise.'

'Yes', I say. 'You will. I will. I won't.'

But something still bothers me about the exchange.

I would say this person is my friend.
I would say he has been, for a decade, one of my closest friends and confidantes.

I would say that things are — at the moment — *complicated*. As is always the case when *feelings* enter the mix, and bodies. Bodies, with their parts that fit together and pull apart. Bodies, with their inclinations — like gravity — to act upon each other, more or less forcefully at certain distances.

The tendency of lives to obey the laws of gravity and to sink downward, falling as gently and slowly as a kite, or violently breaking, smashing.[48]

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48 Elizabeth Hardwick, *Sleepless Nights* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1979), p. xi.

I would say that this is why I watch with a careful eye and a steady hand everything that transpires between the two of us. Partly because I am suspicious and terrified — to my deep core, *mon coeur* — of anything that proposes a version of happiness. But also because I know that people can just really be full of shit. And that this understanding is based not on a personal philosophy of love or no love or unlove or in love, but on Cold Hard Fact.

I would say that I know, too, about that *woman*-shaped box, and I know that it doesn't fit and it is too small to live or to breathe in and it comes without a consent form and all of a sudden you cannot recognise your own contours, your inner or outer geography, at all. At all at all. You are stranded in a land far far away and the only return transportation available is expensive and inconvenient; although, it will at least afford you a great deal of time to sit and think all of the way back home.

Of course, relationships are full of subterfuge, particularly at their beginnings. Full of misinterpretations, misunderstandings — leadings — readings — pleadings —

I try not to think about it, to take the gait any further. I know that it isn't good to make choices for other people; or to make your own out of fear or worry, no matter what you think you know is coming. It's easy to believe that all behaviour is deliberate and purposeful — that you could observe someone and fix their intentions and character firmly in place. But the image always slips a little, or else the contrast seems off — too stark — bleached in places.

I would say that human beings are often very scared, foolish things.
I would say that we know ourselves very little, and others, even less.

How far we all come. How far we all come away from ourselves. So far, so much between, you can never go home again. You can go home, it's good to go home, but you never really get all the way home again in your life. And what's it all for? All I tried to be, all I ever wanted and went away for, what's it all for?[49]

You will. I will.
You do. I do.

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[49] James Agee, *A Death in the Family* (London: Penguin, 2006), p.76.

On the page here, now, it seems foolish — a small sleight — maybe just a conversational error. They happen! To the best of us!! But there had already been other moments, other misgivings, ones that I had ignored, wondering if maybe being recklessly open, against your better judgment, is the only way to get anything at all in this life. Even if it's only a small part. That it's possible to be wrong about *not* wanting something because — because — it seems like it *could* be alright, could be *good*, you can see how it might fit, and sometimes we need to convince ourselves because our selves are confused and don't know very much at all of the cloaked and hidden human things: desire, intimacy, fear, habit.

Essays, like moments, like people, are slippery. They shine and writhe and sigh. They flip over to show their gleaming underbellies, flashing in the light. And so an essay that seems like it might be about love could really an essay about water — floating, swimming, drowning — breathing, not breathing.

Perhaps the two share certain properties in any case.

After we hang up, I stay there. In the ditch. I get up from where I have been crouching. I clamber over some rocks, down a slope to where a small orange digging machine sits. Or maybe a pushing machine, a ploughing machine — it has one of those wide, curved scoops that scrapes along the ground, for moving dirt from place to place. I think this, *this* is the prime seat, and I give it a try to see if it will hold me. It doesn't budge, so I lie down on my side. I lie so that I am cradled. In the distance, I can hear the traffic on the highway nearby. Everything in the background beyond my dark enclave is bright as day, lit up by the streetlights and the Rite-Aid pharmacy sign that looms from down the road. The still air glows orange, with a faint halo of red, white, and blue neon. Though it has now grown quite late, everything in this place is so bright all of the time that I feel like if I leave this tiny ditch, this closest to black pitch, I will ignite into a ball of manufactured flames and burn to the ground, stripped right down to the filament.

A son of the stars and sewers,[50] I say. Quoting all of the time, even when no one else is there.

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50 Tacita Dean, on Gérard de Nerval, in *An Aside* (London: Hayward Gallery, 2005), p.32.

Ideas come to us as the substitutes for griefs,[51] I think. Wishing all of the time, especially when no one else is there.

We all are in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars,[52] I sigh. Hoping all of the time, trying to convince myself to care.

Conesus. Hemlock. Canadice. Honeoye. Canandaigua. Keuka. Seneca. Cayuga. Owasco. Skaneateles. Otisco.

The fingers curl around me to make a fist.

Before heading to the Finger Lakes, I spent a long evening with my best friend and a large bottle of wine.

'He said that…he *loves* me', I told her.

Her eyes widen, and then narrow.

'I know — interesting turn of events, right? I just feel like — it would be nice if for once a man wasn't saying "I'm miserable in my life, I think I'm depressed, I'm having a nervous breakdown" and "I love you" all in the same breath. It makes it a little hard to believe. Even if I was a believer, I think I would still be sceptical.'

'What do you mean a *believer*?'

'You know, like a Love Believer. A lonely heart bleeder.'

'Emily. *Emily*', she looks me in the eye, meaningfully, 'you might not want to hear this, but sometimes you have to try things — you have to let someone love you. Or at least let them *try*.'

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51 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Vol. 6, Time Regained and A Guide to Proust* (London: Random House, 2010), p. 268.

52 Oscar Wilde, 'Lady Windermere's Fan', in *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2007), p.519.

'I know — I mean — it's not that — it's that — I have this sense that — he wants something *from* me, rather than simply wanting *me*.'

'Well, we all want things from people — friends, family, lovers — and the why isn't always so important, doesn't necessarily make it less real, doesn't make the love or the desire false.'

'Yeah — maybe. But I feel like he wants something that I don't actually *have*, you know? Like it's something that's hiding inside of him, but he's scared and maybe a little weak, so he's putting a mask of my face on it and calling it Love. I feel like things are going to get — ugly.'

'How do you know?'

'I just do. Or — maybe I *don't* know, but I know that I don't know if I *want* to know — you *know*? What I mean? Jelly bean?'

'But — '

'Or — maybe I know that untrue and not true aren't the same, but the end result usually is. And sad people — I think that sad people are dangerous people.'

She nods, and we look at each other ruefully.

'So — what are you going to do?'

'See what happens, I guess.' I shrug. 'At least we can talk about writing — I mean *really* talk. Writing, at least, is something we understand about each other.'

The middle of Seneca Lake is so deep, well below sea level, that it is home to a US Navy installation barge, a research vessel that carries out mysterious experiments in the endless blue that yawns beneath. It is so deep that you can barely imagine the bottom, some 800 fathoms of fathoming. I picture the glaciers as they must have crashed and dragged down from the north, two million years ago. Carving their way — scraping their fingers, long,

deep, gouging scars — scratching into the face, the back, the chest of the land beneath. *Pleistocene glaciation.* All week I have been curious about the vessel: what do they do out there? I picture tiny sea pods hanging off of vines that grow from the ship, snaking down to the bottom of the lake. The pods would spawn tiny merbabies. Asleep now, dormant in gestation, in the verdant nadirs, once they wake they will shine and sparkle cerulean — flashing fin skin, opalescent scales. Dark blueblack eyes, fastswimmers, they will dip and dive, silent deeper and deep. On the wine tour, I had murmured something about underwater people and was immediately corrected — 'Uh, no — Emily — I'm pretty sure it's for — plants and other inanimate organic matter.'

'Oh. Oh of course of course, yes, haha! I was just kidding.'

But I hadn't been, really. Or at least it didn't occur to me to make a distinction, in that moment, between the beautiful idea and the something else of truth. We never really do though, do we? All the beauty would leave.

'But — wouldn't it be nice, in any case? I mean, wouldn't it be kind of…exciting?'

Wouldn't it?

Earlier in the evening, having briefly escaped the gender-binaried dinner table, I wandered the grounds of the restaurant — they were lush and extensive, with carefully-landscaped gardens and wide expanses of manicured lawn. I walked as far as I could, to the edge of a promontory that looked out over Seneca Lake where, at its centre, I could see a large flock of gulls landing, taking off, landing again — eddies and tides of birds, swirling white above the calm, clear shine of the evening light lake surface. I wondered what it was like out there, rising and falling in the middle of the middle of the blue, and I wished that I knew — in that ardent and impossible wishing way. Out there it would be silent, and all of the chatter and complications that bordered the vast expanse on which I floated — the fluid and mirrored surface of life — would be far away. Or further away, at least. Distant enough that they might seem only notional, not real impingements. The lake would sparkle and smooth and rock and sigh beneath me, a cradle of shimmer. It would change only with the weather, the wind, the colour of the sky above.

Yes, and sometimes it would be vicious and unpredictable — mercurial chop and whitecaps. But I would be content, I would be happy to expect this of nature — the strength of its flux, the ire of its changeability. In people, it is less charming, though no less predicable. And the human illusion of control and mediation always seems just a little embarrassing and pathetic — the notion that anything in the world could exceed its nature, its base characteristics.

We aren't. We can't. We couldn't.

Who is we?

You know, us.

What, you and me?

No – (broad circular gesture): us. *Us.*

Afterwards, someone sent me a picture they had taken that evening. Me from behind, standing alone, looking out at the lake. 'So pretty!', the caption said. It took me a moment to realise what the picture was of, I had been so unaware of the possibility of being observed, believing moments of solitude that are stolen, rather than designated, to be of the best variety. This seemed an image of something else entirely. I am always surprised, though I don't know why, at all of the things pictures don't capture. And how many potential distortions — barrel, balance, curvature, depth, density — double-exposure — ghost images —

One morning, at the crack of dawn, a friend of my sister's rode his bike all the way around the lake, racing the rising July humidity. When I spoke to him about it, he told me how beautiful it had been. I couldn't really imagine. Not the beauty, but wanting to go *all the way around.* And not only because it would mean cycling about 106km. It seemed to me that it would steal away a small part of you, to go so far, to see so many things — such distance — only to end up right back where you began. The idea of such encircled finality or circumscription, *ring-a-ring-a-roses*, felt to me like a kind of betrayal. Of what, I'm not sure.

I am both too big and too weak for writing: I am *alongside it*, for writing is always dense, violent, indifferent to the infantile ego which solicits it. Love has of course a complicity with my language (which maintains it), but cannot be *lodged* in my writing.

Roland Barthes, 'Inexpressible Love [écrire/to write]', *A Lover's Discourse*

The Bluffs #2.

Waiting. Waiting and waiting. And waiting.

I am waiting to hear from the Guild. As though a reply will mean something significant. As though the Guild has all of the answers I need; the Guild knows everything I have ever wanted to know. If they would just *tell* me, it would all fall into place. I *know* it would.

But the waiting is also an excuse. The waiting is an excuse for incomprehension, because I have read everything I can, and all I am left with is an endless stream of questions. I take notes and notes and more notes. And in between the lines, always, the essay and the essayists lurk, with their insights and incites, a *sotto voce* chorus, keen and rumbling.

Knowledge that is delivered as a thread to be spun on, ought to be delivered and intimated, if it were possible, in the same method wherein it was invented: and so it is possible of knowledge induced.[53]

Francis Bacon is thought to be one of the first essayists, a near contemporary of Michel de Montaigne, although the works of the two are generally considered intellectually opposed: Montaigne the Humanist Philosopher and Bacon the proto-Enlightenment Scientist. Though without nuance, the categorisation rings mostly true; there is a looseness and a jocularity to Montaigne's work, in both form and content, whereas Bacon's oeuvre is impersonal, studied, careful, and detached.

And yet somehow my heart always warms to Bacon (ha! hearty nourishment!), the chilly, ecumenical statesman. In places, the content of his writing is so much more generous than its often bloodless language implies. He champions the importance of the aphorism as fragment, an argument that in many ways pre-figures definitively anti-Enlightenment elements of Romantic philosophy.[54] He believes in the power and necessity of words as medium — facts and formulas alone are not enough.[55] As his first volume of essays goes to print, he writes to his brother and describes them as unripe fruit and 'fragments of my

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53 Francis Bacon, 'Of the Advancement of Learning', in *The Works of Francis Bacon, Lord Chancellor of England: A New Edition, Vol.II* (London: William Pickering, 1825), p.xvii.

54 Carl H. Klaus, 'Towards a Collective Poetics of the Essay', in *Essayists on the Essay*, ed. by Carl H. Klaus and Ned Stuckey-French (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), p.xvi.

55 Loren Eiseley, 'Bacon as Scientist and Educator', in *Francis Bacon and the Modern Dilemma* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), p.34.

conceits…without any further disgrace than the weakness of their author'.[56] Beneath the surface lies a reassuring vulnerability. He is human, after all.

And consider the elegance of the simile, knowledge *as a thread to be spun on*. (Different from spinning yarns, mind). Pull the loose end, watch it unspool. Weave it, thread it through your materials until they are bound and braided, cut from the same cloth.

It is of the utmost importance: the way something moves, what it is made of, *how* it was crafted. Knowledge snakes and shakes, follows the rattling tail.

I mean tale.

I mean tell. *Tell me.*

Mendieta, work: general

In the beginning, other people held the camera, helped her to carry out the activity at hand, to document the event. Later on, she did everything alone. Turned the camera on herself, by herself. The solitude, the interiority was important. Did she feel that the kind of communion she was looking for could be shared but not *experienced* with others?

Early on used a plywood form to mark her silhouette on dirt, grass, sand, mud, snow, ice
Later, used her body to mark her silhouette directly into the ground —

different kinds of siluetas — (subtractive process):
gunpowder
grave
blood
smoke
carved
burned (diff. from gunpowder)

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56 Francis Bacon, 'Prefatory Epistles, To my loving brother, Sir John Constable, KT', in *Essays Moral, Economical, and Political* (London: T. Payne, 1801), p.vii.

figures made out of — (additive process):
berries
shells
sticks
flowers
cloth
ice
rocks

There were three steps to the process: conceptualisation, realisation, documentation. It's interesting how painstaking Mendieta was about the documentation: she took whole rolls of film and then selected one image, *the image*, that would come to stand for the work. Meanwhile, she felt that the pieces themselves, in the flesh, would always remain as a different, parallel incarnation.

To me, the work has existed on different levels. It existed on the level of being in nature and eventually being eroded away. But obviously when it's shown to someone as a photograph, that's what it is. It's a photograph of an object, right?[57]

The final image was carefully chosen. Isn't that what usually sticks anyways, one image — clear, like a photograph? Bracket. Click. Bracket. Click.

By real I mean I wanted my images to have power, to be magic.[58]

In an archive, however, the issue of extensive documentation is sometimes problematic — everything automatically becomes a document, and there is no one left to ask, in some cases, what exactly is this a photograph of? I return repeatedly to one photograph in particular, *Silueta, Bear Mountain (upstate New York), 1970*. I scour the image for markings amongst the boulders and the ground thick with fallen leaves, but I can see nothing: no form, no silhouette emerges. Is it a work, or was she just scouting a site to which she might later return?[59]

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57 Ana Mendieta, interview with Joan Marter (1 February 1985), as cited in Rosenthal, Stephanie, 'Ana Mendieta: Traces', in *Ana Mendieta: Traces* (London: Hayward Publishing, 2013), p.15.

58 Ibid, p.11.

59 'Mendieta chooses a site only after she has wandered through it enough times to comprehend its most intimate characteristics: sounds, fragrances, plants, stones, wildlife. In this way she establishes her own history with the land… She uses the curves and crevices native to her chosen site in the creation of these small, solitary figures…. Mendieta knows

I think often of the Robert Capa quotation, 'If your picture isn't any good, you're not standing close enough.'[60] I think the same is true of writing — you need to get as close as you can, you need to peer and stare and scrutinise and take everything apart before you can put it back together in a meaningful way.

I feel frustrated and a little haunted by Mendieta's photograph from Bear Mountain. Even when I am not looking at it, it is still there, lodged behind my eyes. I return to it again and again, sure that *this time* I know where to look, only to be left dumbfounded once more. Am I missing something? Am I a little *slow*, perhaps? Or is it just difficult to admit that at some point, no matter how hard we look, there's nothing there.

Do not whine…Do not complain. Work harder. Spend more time alone.[61]

And so I read more. And I wait. Waiting and reading and reading and waiting. I take notes in between my notes. Stories come weaving in and out, tangled skeins of veins rise to the surface, running red lines across the pages, covering my hands, snaking up my arms and into my arteries. She picks up where I leave off. Or maybe it's the opposite — I pick up where she leaves off. We are fused, a transfusion.

I'm not interested in the formal qualities of my materials, but their emotional and sensual ones.[62]

Me too, *me too*. I wonder what the equivalent would be in writing. My words often feel so pallid and bodiless on the page.

I read about Mendieta's interest in metaphor, symbolism, anthropomorphism. The idea that 'to anthropomorphise the earth is to endow it with sentience, desire, and identity; it is to think of the earth as more than merely a sculptural material'.[63]

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her territory so well that she can locate a potential site one year and return to it the next with drawings for its transformation.' Janet Heit, 'Ana Mendieta', *Arts Magazine*, January 1980, p.5.

60 Robert Capa, in Richard Whelan, *Robert Capa: A Biography* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), p.211.

61 Joan Didion, *Blue Nights* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), p.107.

62 Ana Mendieta, as cited in Channing Gray, 'Earth Art', *Providence Journal Bulletin*, 21 April 1984, as cited in Laura Roulet, 'Ana Mendieta and Carl Andre: Duet of Leaf and Stone', *Art Journal*, 63.3 (2004), pp.80-101 (p.95).

63 Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Performativity, and Exile* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 18.

But is it? The earth gives, the earth takes, the earth embraces, the earth threatens. The earth sustains. The earth exists; it cares not for us. With love and destruction alike, we pray, we demand its acknowledgment. But it doesn't even know we are here; just a blink in the earth woman's eye.

William Blake wrote, 'To the eyes of the Man of the Imagination, Nature is imagination itself.'[64] Does that mean that Nature inherently mirrors and reflects the structures of the imagination, OR, that Imagination imbues Nature with its characteristics? According to Viktor Shklovsky, 'the purpose of art is to import the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony.'[65] But what *is* stony? Is your stony the same as mine? How do I explain to you, how do I represent my stoniness so that you can feel and compare it with your stoniness, your rock, your age?

I am more convinced by Roger Caillois, lover of stones and all things stony, riddler of the rocks, who wrote that stones open up 'l'orée du songe' — the shore of dreaming: 'Philosophers have not hesitated to identify the real and the rational. I am persuaded that a different bold step…would lead to discover the grid of basic analogies and hidden connections that constitute the logic of the imaginary.'[66]

In a sense, these are versions of the same argument: the existence of a universal syntax. In nature, in the imagination — in both — together — apart. Either way, you need to crack the stone wide open to find out what it is inside.

My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe.[67]

To participate in a version of making, of analysis and criticism that refuses to leave the stone whole, safely reassured by its discrete stoniness; a criticism that cracks it wide open, breaks it into a mess of shears shards dust, sure, but with the possibility of revealing a

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64 William Blake, 'Letter to Reverend Dr. Trusler, 23 August 1799', in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. by David V. Erdman (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), p.702.

65 Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Device', in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991), p.6

66 Roger Caillois, *Pierres*, as cited in Marina Warner, 'The Writing of Stones', *Cabinet*, 29 (2008) <http://cabinetmagazine.org/issues/29/warner.php> [accessed 20 January 2014] (para. 21 of 22)

67 Ana Mendieta, as cited in Blocker, p.80.

glittering centre, the mysterious complex of images and meanings concealed deep within. This seems, to me, valiant and crucial. Critical, one might say. *She's in critical.*

Inclination speaks out: 'I don't want to enter this risky world of discourse; I want nothing to do with it insofar as it is decisive and final; I would like to feel it all around me, calm and transparent, profound, infinitely open, with others responding to my expectations, and truth emerging, one by one. All I want is to be borne along, within it, and by it, a happy wreck'.[68]

Mendieta's work received a host of criticisms rarely levelled at her male peers who engaged in similar practices. For instance, 'Mendieta clearly had a troubled sense of self, as her very self-centred art — in which there are not only no men, but no other women — suggests. Her trouble had to do with her relationship with her mother and various other surrogates…Mendieta preferred to have narcissistic intercourse with Mother Earth than sexual intercourse with a man.'[69] Even as Michael Heizer aggressively removed enormous chunks of ground from various sites, and then commenced the building of his own city (devoid of humans, NB.), and Walter de Maria literally electrocuted huge areas the earth, it is Mendieta's work that concerns — for its *narcissism.*

It would almost be funny, if the criticism didn't house such a thinly veiled streak of violence, anger, and scorn. Blatant sexism aside, the statement seems strange to me for its intellectual conservatism: isn't every form of making inherently self-centred? In that we are confined to our view of the world, which the act of making cannot help but reveal? It just depends on how honest you are about it. How avidly you try to slot things into categories, ask genre fill in the holes of intentionality, rely on classification to sort out notions of honesty, truth, lies, untruths—in a way that will set them apart neatly and evenly. This does this. That does that. This is better, worse, right, wrong.

I want to know, I want to see what happens if we allow the essay form to shape what it means to address an object or subject. If we take the essay's formal and intellectual dictates as philosophical dictums: ask, don't demand — question, don't answer — speak loudly, but don't shout — listen, and try not to interrupt — have a conversation — keep it alive — the beauty, the pleasure, the essential mystery — stop where you have nothing left to say — don't care who gets the last word —

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68 Michel Foucault, 'The Discourse on Language', in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and; The Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), pp.215-216

69 Donald Kuspit, 'Ana Mendieta, Autonomous Body', in *Ana Mendieta* (Saint Jacques de Compostelle: Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea, 1996), as cited in Blocker, p. 14.

The emotional, the sensual qualities.

There is the undeniable sense that, even in death — especially in death — Mendieta was not able to escape the essentialism and categorisation she so feared in life.[70]

Sometimes I don't even like writing about her, because it feels like I am taking more away, from whatever scraps of truth might have been left behind. All of the facts that it seems can no longer simply be stated without defining their position, along what lines and arguments they fall. Chronology, events, moments that have been stolen from themselves.

Details dressed up in drag.

Patron saint of:
Feminism
Cuban art
Earth art
Ancient cultures
Goddess mythology
Pro-Communist
Anti-Communist
Exiled
Privileged
Nationalist
Refugee
Exotic
etc.
etc.
etc.

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70 There was a period in which Mendieta felt the need to distance herself from A.I.R. gallery, which had been established in NYC in the mid-1970s by a group of women seeking to redress the imbalance of opportunities for women in the art world with regards to exhibition space and critical attention, amongst other concerns, in parallel with the surrounding feminist discourse of the period. The rubric of being located within a feminist group, Mendieta felt, was overtaking and neutralising the content of her work. Julia Bryan-Wilson, 'Against the Body: Interpreting Ana Mendieta', in *Ana Mendieta: Traces*, ed. by Stephanie Rosenthal (London: Hayward Publishing, 2013), pp. 31-32.

Some things are ripe for projections — well-formed models on which sets of clothes hang perfectly — just, so. See how the fabric falls, how it drapes her form — what clean lines it creates, how becoming, how flattering. Now *there* is a woman, *that* is a real Woman Artist, I tell you.

Being asked to represent, being told you *are* something that you don't believe in, something that you can't even recognise, is an alienating experience. You feel the cold shroud laid over your body, as your real live self, sill warm, stares up at the white linen: you can hear voices nearby speaking to someone with your name, but all you can hear is – *may she rest in peace*. No one likes to be buried, especially the dead.

I never want to do this. The dressing up, the dressing down. The window dressing. But of course I *do*; I find myself doing it all of the time.

I'm like her. She's like me. Now I understand something more, something bigger.
I mean, yeah — maybe.
But maybe not.

I feel very conflicted about everything. All of the texts I read, everything I write, seems conflicted.

Sometimes I think that's OK.

Sometimes I think that's the point. An essay is supposed to be, on some level at least, an argument with yourself, right? An essay seeks to represent, in form and ethos, what can never be fully grasped.

The thinker does not think, but rather transforms himself into an arena of intellectual experience without simplifying it.[71]

You have to *undo* things in order to *redo* things, right? Cut it open — put your hand into the body cavity — feel the weight, the girth of the organs — feel honoured to see how things work when they really work — sew it back up — and walk away.

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71 Theodor Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', *New German Critique*, trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, 32 (1984), pp. 151-171 (p.161).

Maybe that's why it hurts so much: there's a convalescence involved.

There is a charge
For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart –
It really goes.[72]

Other times, I don't think it's OK at all. I have nightmares. I wake in a cold sweat with the words — Appropriation, Exploitation, Manipulation — running through my mind, running from the corners of my mouth like tar.

I don't want to be Mendieta, to don her mantle, to make parallels. I just want to trace, I want to follow the lines, finger the grooves, the ridges, the depressions. To feel their impressions. The impressions they have left, that they leave.

Do what she do.
Do what she do, but in words.

She lay down in a grave and placed flowers so that they seemed to grow from her body.

Do what she do.
Do what she do, but in words.

Pseudomorphology. Geomorphology.

As though it might be possible for her body — the body, my body, our body — to open a hole, an aperture, a window, a door by which other people may access an experience.

An embodiment.
But I can't! How do you make words lie down in a grave and cover themselves with flowers? What words could be the same as how the sun felt and the dust and the dirt and the stones against skin and the smell of the earth.

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72 Sylvia Plath, 'Lady Lazarus', *Ariel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), p.18.

The viewer of my work may or may not have had the same experience as myself. But perhaps it will lead to their own idea, their own version of the experience, of what they might feel I have experienced. Their minds can then be convinced that the images I present contain some of the quality of the actual experience.[73]

Or maybe I could. Because there are other ways to describe things. From beside, next to, around — in the margins — everything that hovers in the space just outside of the body.

Metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche. Similarity in difference. A hop skip and a jump. A part for the whole.

Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted…live in fragments no longer.[74]

Rainer Maria Rilke's poem, 'Archaic Torso of Apollo', ends with an address from the statue to the viewer (and reader): 'You must change your life'.[75] The headless fragment and the poem alike tell us that a work of art is not merely a reproduction or a representation of reality, but an enrichment, an expansion that is itself deeply human.

I have always found it strangely comforting as a statement. Maybe it is a useful reminder that, no matter what you might think, you just aren't *there* yet. Maybe it means that the things we are interested in, the things we love, possess their own reality — more real, in ways, than being human. Maybe they don't belong to us at all; maybe we need to earn them.

You must change your life.

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73 Ana Mendieta, artist's statement for her exhibition at Corroboree: Gallery of New Concepts, University of Iowa, 1977, as cited in Rosenthal, p.10.

74 E.M. Forster, *Howard's End* (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), p.160.

75 Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Archaic Torso of Apollo', trans. Edward Snow, in *The Art of the Sonnet*, ed. by Stephen Burt and David Mikics (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p.230.

The Coast.

Limitless, unbordered, unobstructed expanses of sky are full of possibility. The possibility of freedom. The possibility of terror. On the coast, you could see something days away, see it advancing towards you, and know — moreover —that there was no escape. You just have to sit there and wait. Isn't it better, sometimes, not to know what's coming? Wide, empty expanses are dangerous things for the mind of porous boundaries. For instance, say you are on holiday in Maine with your family. Say you go out for dinner one night, and there is an *ominous* sense about things — it hovers low and heavy in the air — you begin to feel as though you are stooping. Say that everyone fights about everything; finds reasons that the food is terrible; feels insulted by the service staff. Say that George Bush Sr. is in the restaurant with a bunch of other old Republicans. An incredibly wealthy, buttoned-up family of Aryan-looking sycophants stop by his table to gush about how much his leadership and his family mean to them. Say one of their pale children stares at you with a strange malice, looks you straight in the eye as she digs a tiny finger into her wet, red nostril — the only presence of colour on her person. There are two tables of security agents positioned nearby, men sitting in stiff suits, awkwardly drinking orange juice or club soda from glasses with decorative curly straws. Say you notice the curls in the straws match the curls of their ear pieces, almost exactly. Say it seems funny, in a way, but you are too filled with an inexplicable sense of dread to really appreciate it and all of a sudden it is darker outside much earlier than it should be because a thick blanket of clouds has rolled in from off the coast. Say that when you leave, one of your family members points out the Bush family 'summer home', and it is about half the size of the undergraduate university you went to and you feel sick and are somehow immediately under the impression that it is made of cardboard or something else synthetic, like an architectural model, because it is just that clean and impenetrable looking. Like it is not a real house. Not something that you could go into, something that might contain or sustain life. You wonder if it will wilt and buckle in the impending deluge because, as it is, you can hardly stand under the weight of the air. Say that when you get back to where you are staying, at the end of a beach down the coast, you see crackling light high in the clouds in the distance. Not like lightning, though. Like something else. It looks like *fire*. There are loud sounds, too. But not like thunder. Like something else. It sounds like *cracks*, like gunning, like *bombs*. Say you ask your father what it is, you say: *what is going on out there?* And he says: *just what it looks like, a thunderstorm*. But say you don't find this comforting at all, because you don't believe him, because you

think you know, you feel certain you know: *this is it, finally; this is the Bad Thing that is coming, and it is coming here and it is coming now, just like I always knew it would.* Say you ask again: *are you sure? ARE YOU SURE? It doesn't look like a storm to me.* And he says: *what else do you think it could be?* And you're surprised but also embarrassed at the possibility of having to explain. Say that a cold kind of fear clutches the inside of your chest so dense and tight and lonely that you feel dread spilling slowly, viscous like tar from behind your eyes, down through your sinuses, into the back of your throat. Black and sure and inevitable. *Somewhere a glacier is crumbling and crashing into the water. Somewhere in the depths of the ocean, a plate of earth is shifting, and creatures of which we will never know face and consume each other with unspeakable violence. Somewhere a star circles its twin and then dies. Without mourning is there no death, only a ceasing to exist?* Say the only thing that reassures you is that you are in America and if it was a war or someone attacking, they would probably already be prepared to fight back and maybe even *annihilate*, giving you and your family enough time to drive back to Canada. Say once you are back in the house and everyone goes to sleep, you stay up and keep getting out of bed to peek through the blind slats to check on the cloud activity, coming up with ways to monitor variations in frequency, distance, and volume. *Just what it looks like, a thunderstorm.* But no, but no: *I had a dream about this; something is coming.* Say the thing that really knocks your socks off is when you realise maybe it is just that – Something. Not a thunderstorm, not an apocalypse, not the Bad Thing: just *some*thing. An atmospheric disturbance entirely unaccounted for, something beyond your realm of comprehension or conjecture because it doesn't care about you, doesn't think you matter, doesn't even know that you exist. *Some things* just happen and they don't mean anything at all. Not everything is a sign or a symbol. What then? Isn't it better, sometimes, not to know the details? What's the difference, if you will never really understand anyways? Say that the next day you decide to go swimming. Say that it is September and too cold and it is also the Atlantic Ocean but you are leaving the continent soon and so even though it is so cold you scream can't not SCREAM, you hold yourself under and you open your eyes to the stinging salt water to see because you want to know *what is out there.* Then, say that there is nothing at all. Nothing but blue.

The line of economy.

Conesus. Hemlock. Canadice. Honeoye. Canandaigua. Keuka. Seneca. Cayuga. Owasco. Skaneateles. Otisco.

Are they in the right order?

Before and after and now too, though less often, I go to bed with them at night and wake with them on my tongue. Lapping their waters lapping at the shores of the day, the edges of my mind as it rises, surfacing inelegantly, lumbering towards the shore, heavy-footed with the departure of slumber and the rapid evaporation of dreams.

I am ceaselessly drawn by their incantatory quality. I write them on the back of cue cards, which I stack neatly at the corner of my desk. I write them on scraps of paper, which I fold and put into the pockets of different garments, for safe-keeping. I write them inside the covers of books, which I slide back onto the shelves, secret, riddling volumes. I write them against the wall with my finger at night, when I can't sleep, and then I place both hands flat and draw my fingers down in the shapes of the lakes themselves — going back, of course, for the 11th — the pinkie — and the honourary 12th — the thumb. In the dark, I imagine that I can see the Finger Lakes snaking down in rivulets, running smooth and clear, stretching out to connect to neighbouring arteries so that the wall seems to swell and pulse — brimming, balneal, diluent, lacustrine.

When I write them, it is a smooth soothing — an expurgation, an exculpation, an exhortation. I cannot even keep track of them all — the cue cards, the lists, the scraps of papers. Loosed from their hiding places, they shift and float around my room. They skid across the floor, hide under the far edge of the bed against the wall where I can't reach them. They stick to the soles of shoes and follow me out of the house, down the street. I like to believe that when they surface again, these tiny prayers, it will mean something of great import — even if only to say the same thing over and over again.

Arguably, this kind of obsession could happen with any set of words, depending on the individual at hand — fingered — anointed. But I think that the geology has gotten inside of me. I think of the Inuit legend of Sedna, sea lady of the deep, with her tangles of hair.

Her lonely igloo at the bottom of the sea. Have her fingers grown back? Her fingers that were cut off by her father as she tried to climb back into the boat from the stormy sea where he had thrown her. Each severed digit gave birth to a different kind of sea mammal. But they all swam away. She had sent her children away too, her pack of half-human half-dog brethren. They sailed away on the soles of her shoes and became the Inuit, the caribou, and the white people. No one, no thing ever looked back at her — lonely lady, not even just to say thanks for all of the sacrifices, but we must leave now, to make our own contributions. Maybe she didn't mind. Maybe she preferred to be alone.

Conesus. Hemlock. Canadice. Honeoye. Canandaigua. Keuka. Seneca. Cayuga. Owasco. Skaneateles. Otisco.

If I can remember all of them in the correct order.

If I can say them forwards and backwards, four times in a row, without pausing.

If I can *spell* each one forwards and backwards.
If I could rearrange their letters into an acrostic a mesostic a mnemonic.
If
If
If

If X, then what?
The incantatory, the magic is borne of nothing but repetition.

Thou talk'st of nothing.[76]

And yet it suits the insomniac, this kind of tautology — a belief, a structure that defines, fuels, and reinforces itself. Other things are like this, too: fear, anxiety, hatred, desire.

Counting lakes, naming bodies of water into the deep wash of sleep.

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76 William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet,* in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare,* I.5.102.

In the stack of cards, I find one rogue cue with an Emerson quotation: 'the line of beauty is the result of perfect economy'.[77] One of my most treasured words, I give it to you here: *economy*. Treasured for its simple cadence, and because — like all of the beautiful things — it eludes me so.

What is beautiful is seized.[78]

I tend to excess. I sit down to write what was supposed to be a paragraph — its beginning and end, aims and argument clear as day — and end up with three or four pages. A digression, a story, a philosophical meander, strings of adjectives, lists of words — oh, LISTS and *lists* — the lists of words! They cover the page, sneak into the margins, between the lines, running this way and that. I can explain no better than to say that, at the time, it pleases me. That one thing generates another and another and another. Simply that there *are* so many words, blushing colour wheels of synonyms carefully bleeding hue to hue. How language can get you from one place to another so easily sometimes, without planning to at all. Like rivers, like gravity.

There are the quotations, too. From stories, plays, poems, songs — *essays*. Or should I say *essayists*? The essaying quotations seem to stand on their own two feet, plucked from a person rather than a text. All of these words I cherish — borrowing tongues — speaking in texts when my own fail me, or when a silence covers them over.

Even so, editing at a later date is always a process of humiliation. And ECONOMY is the most brutal task-master. Entire pages combine and reduce to produce a few sentences — all else, so significant at the time of writing, falls away. I know that this is what writers do. I know that this land of economy — clear cut slash and burn kill your darlings — is where these exquisite phrases are *born*. But for some reason, I still expect things to come out whole, perfectly formed.

Shamefully, I fear that this desire resides in some aspect of belief that writing is a skill and not a craft: innate, as opposed to laboured. When, in fact, it is both. *Should* be both. Some things come out complete and perfect, and some things don't. Some come out

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77 Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Beauty', in *Essays and English Traits: The Five Foot Shelf of Classic,* 5 (New York: Cosimo, 2010), p.314.

78 Lorrie Moore, 'What is beautiful is seized', in *Lorrie Moore: The Collected Stories* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), p.561.

with deformities, catheter bags of mess and waste hanging off of them, placenta still attached. A tangle of flesh and tubes; words and wires. It is the putting out, the coming out, the giving out that is the skill. It is the sorting out that is the craft. The inquisitive mind and a love of language, elegance, and precision — but always with a whiff of blood, sweat, and tears.

Like the essay — the sweaty, beautiful essay, which is never ashamed to tell or show you exactly how it got somewhere and what a fucking *slog* it was when the going got tough because how else do you get to the downhill coast with the breath-taking view at the end.

As Kenko said, Zuihitsu: *Follow the brush.*[79]

But, but — but: sometimes things jar, they rub up against each other and jostle. Uncongenial. Elbow in the ribs.

As in, the logic of the mind is not always capable of resolving itself, or staying the course. We end up at an Answer that represents only a fraction of the Question, and allow it to stand in for the whole. The illusion of understanding, of control. And we forget easily: all of the hopes we began with, everything we wanted way back at that starting line. Is there some other way to hold it all at once, every last filthy desire? To show at the same time the beginning and the middle and the end?

I wanted to send an image of smoke into the atmosphere.[80]

Conesus. Hemlock. Canadice. Honeoye. Canandaigua. Keuka. Seneca. Cayuga. Owasco. Skaneateles. Otisco.

I always thought that *Coriolanus* had the best insults: *Go, get you home, you fragments!*[81]

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79 Yoshida Kenkō, 'Introduction', in *Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenkō*, trans. by Donald Keene (Rutland, VT; Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 1967), p.xvi.

80 Ana Mendieta, transcription of slide lecture at Alfred University, 1981, as cited in Rosenthal, p.18.

81 William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, 1.1.230.

The way we believe in words, like the way we believe in the people we care about, is terrifying. As though the love of anything eradicates the universal reality of deep and impenetrable secrecy.

and nor for but or yet so
je tu il elle on nous vous ils elles
ohne bis um gegen entlang für durch

Linking words. Conjugations. Transitional words. What would we do without them? How would we ever be able to bring anything together at all.

Get thee gone, fragments.

But will he find you,
Recognize you when he sees you,
Give you the thing he has for you?[82]

We wanted.

Everything.

Nothing.

A couple of things.

A few things.

Several things.

Many things.

All things.

Always.

Never.

Sometimes.

They wondered.

why do we think that Art is a representational object?

does the quality of something's preservation determine its recollection?

who remembers what remembers where remembers when?

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82 John Ashbery, 'At North Farm', in *A Wave* (London: Ardent Media, 1985), p.1.

is it still a simile if you say something is *not* like something else?

in language, what is the same as taking a picture? Taking a word? (Pick a vowel!) (It'll last longer?)

what is the difference between a 'performance' and a 'tableau'?

what is the difference between 'representation' and 'reproduction'?

is reading an act or a re-enactment?

is making an act of re-making?

is knowing an act of unknowing?

what is the in-between space of writing?

can written work ever be transient or immaterial?

She worried.

that the more you think about things, the more you know — the more the borders, the boundaries begin to disappear, to merge, to eliminate themselves entirely.

that the more you think about things, the more you know — the more the borders, the boundaries begin to reinforce themselves, to seem like all, like everything like real, solid, incredibly important things.

about the feeling of needing to witness, to see something in person. What happens when you finally do? When you get there, what is it like? Is it like coming home, or is it like being sent away?

that once you start telling stories about yourself, about your own life, something strange happens. You aren't really *in* them anymore – not completely. You begin to characterise

others, yourself, behaviours, even in the moment, as it happens. You narrate everything. You hear an omniscient voice-over, you repeat bits of conversation back to yourself, hoping you'll remember word for word, trying it on for pace and rhythm, wondering what part of the story it would fit into best. Like an auto-cannibalism. Anthropophagi. We are consumed by that which we consume.

about manipulation, and why she thought that there was some version of story-telling that didn't involve a process of choosing to put some things in and to leave other things out.

that she liked people either too much or not at all.

about appropriation. Humans are magpies: they beg borrow steal whatever they can to make meaning, cobbling together mad structures in which to live, even as they tilt variously, precariously around them – walls of skin, beams of bones. They sleep under dirty quilts woven from hair, felt, leaves, yarn, fur. These fine-boned collages, these stabs in the dark, they are shelter nonetheless. They keep us warm. It's a hack-job though, isn't it.

what if the only thing that really happens in a story is language?

that if she wrote about certain things, people would reduce her work so that it meant, so that it related *only* to those things. Women. Female. Feminine. Feminist. Try not to write about love. Or the BODY. Or your mother. Try to make sure you never sound too angry or critical. Or bleak. No one likes a sad girl. Try not to want anything too much. You might sound *desperate*. It's *unattractive*. No one likes an ugly girl.

about logic. How does it really work? How does it hold things together? Outside of categories and conventions, is there such a thing as *pure* logic? Or is it just that you pick your angle, that's your story and you're sticking to it? It sometimes seems to her that when logic arrives, it screeches to an embarrassed halt — caught in its tracks — and slinks off quietly through the night, hoping its footprints will be gone by morning, that no one will notice the Order of which we so often speak in reference to Nature is not

naturally occurring at all. Other times the logic wails like a ghost train keeling on one rail, a tiny chorus of shrieks — far, closer, then here, now gone.

that the biggest struggle is doing what you want, what comes naturally, and not feeling that you need to apologise or make excuses. That this is the thing that really counts, the thing you should be trying to explain and to give, to show to other people: what you want — what comes naturally — and all the struggle involved, too.

about ownership. How do you know what belongs to you and what doesn't? What is your story to tell and what isn't? The ethics of this — depending on the particular moment at hand — are often hazy.

that she could never understand nostalgia, and therefore the past, as useful. A friend had once told her that in some cultures it served a happy purpose — it produced joy that something had occurred, rather than sorrow that it was no longer. She couldn't seem to get her head around it. Or was it her heart. She was always getting the two confused.

how much of her and how much of me?

more often than not: what is the point?

Sliced in two like a flatfish.[83]

On the morning of my sister's wedding, I stand at the window of the hotel room, looking out across the lake. For the first time in days, it is overcast. I think about trying to describe to him what it looked like in the sun all of the days previous, before he arrived. How clear it was, how bright. Instead, I face the grey lake in silence, my back to him. Intimacy — just the idea of it, the scent, the *threat* — begets a solitude in me that is not blameless. But I am careful never to claim otherwise. I have *learned* to be careful. It is a choice, it is a decision. This is what I tell myself, at least.

Out on the choppy water, a kitesurfer battles the wind — catching gusts of air with such force that one imagines them to be solid — invisible muscularities of the atmosphere. Again and again he lifts himself up, his board slashes arcs through the air around him as he tries to stay above the water. Seeking that moment against gravity. I feel my lungs stretch out of my chest in hope, buoying, winged exhalations — here, I think, have these. I could live without them, for a short while, at least.

When I was younger, I was on a competitive diving team. We had to practice swimming lengths of the pool underwater, staying down for as long as possible, to improve lung capacity. It seemed strange to me, that this was possible to teach your lungs to swell and grow, to hold more air. It sounded like magic. Everyone is familiar with the feeling of holding your breath — the bursting sensation that blooms inside the chest. I will tell you now that the secret is to push past the bursting, because just on the other side lies a calm plateau where you will feel that you could go on forever, coasting in a blue silence. It's difficult to believe, but just because it *feels* like something is going to burst, doesn't mean that it will. Lungs are not bags of air, but rather dense, spongy organs full of veins and capillaries. They are one of the organs we can in fact teach to expand, to grow. I used to imagine it while I was underwater, that they were swelling, increasing, gold-shining light glowing through their fleshy, pulsing membranes. Like in biology films, the time lapse photography of a seed growing into a plant, pushing upwards through the soil.

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83 '"Sliced in two like a flatfish', says Aristophanes, 'each of us is perpetually hunting for the matching half of himself"', Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), p.31.

I try to send this glowing, pulsing knowledge out to the man who battles the surges and swells of water and air alike. It doesn't seem to have any effect. Maybe kitesurfing is very difficult. Maybe this kitesurfer is not very good. Either way, he keeps plunging back down, hurtling into the water. He crashes into its surface face-first, so often that I start to feel like my sinuses are filling up with water, and I have to turn away from the window — back to face the room.

'There's a guy outside kite surfing', I say. 'I think he might be — well — not an *expert*.'

He laughs a sort of brittle, unconvincing laugh. Which is not so terrible, I will realise later, when it becomes a different kind of laugh — mean and obvious, disappointed, turning inwards at the navel, and hard-edged like cheap, shiny plastic. I wish I didn't have to wait until it was a more convenient moment, until he had sufficient time to role-play through various anxieties and narcissisms, to ask — what is it that you thought you would find here, in me? What is it, exactly, that you want?

Rhetorical questions, it goes without saying. Or does it.

'I need to get ready', I say, and walk into the bathroom. I leave my notebook on the table, where I have been copying out a more neatly written version of my speech for the wedding toasts. There is a pencil lying across its cover at an angle, and I make sure to line the spine up with the side of telephone, precisely. Habits die hard when you have nosy family members.

When I return from my shower, the pencil is in the right place, but — am I imagining it? — the spine of the book is misaligned. Its bottom edge tilts forwards like a broken pelvis. I don't give much thought to any of this until later, trying to pinpoint when and where his behaviour changed, began the slow, slouching downslide. My first impulse is not to be upset, but rather to wonder what might have bothered him — some of the dark content, or the fact that he isn't mentioned anywhere? What do we worry about more? That we might not know all of someone, might never be able to understand them, or that they might not need us in the way we want them to?

I have to remind myself, the lesson is not 'don't leave your notebook out when you are not in the room', but rather, 'don't be intimate with someone who might read your notebook'.

But — I think — but, I would do it. Maybe I would do that, read someone's notebook. Writers are a curious bunch. Always looking for material.

But — I think — but, maybe he didn't anyways. Maybe I imagined the whole thing. Maybe there was an atmospheric disturbance or a rumble in the ground — STORM COUNTRY — and the book moved itself! Or maybe the times of endings and beginnings, hopes and realities, are so often incommensurate that it seemed reasonable to extend certain moments, trying to generate chronologies of equal weight.

But — I think — balance is a tease. People change for less complicated reasons than we imagine. All of those solid, invisible muscularities of the atmosphere.

& love is an evil word.[84]

A book lives inside me. I think, sometimes, right where my heart should be — its hard-edged binding, its sharp corners — hardening and sharpening all of the time against the soft organs that flesh out around it — making space, trying to accommodate the growing tome. When I breathe, the pages flutter and rustle a paper sigh as they turn — dutiful as ever, taking notes.

After the wedding ceremony, before the dinner, there is a reception. The venue for the day is one of many banquet/reception halls scattered throughout the Finger Lakes region, catering to those drawn by the picturesque surroundings. This particular hall sits about halfway down the eastern side of Seneca Lake. It used to be someone's house. A 1970s mansion built into a hill that overlooks the lake in the distance, farmland separates it from the water, rolls of green and fields of corn, dotted here and there with barns and other farm buildings.

Coincidentally, this weekend there is an annual fun fair that takes place in one of the fields down the hill, close to the shore of the lake, at the junction where we turn off to drive up to the venue. All week as we have been setting up, so too has the fun fair. Colour-faded, rickety looking machines assembled and test run, neon bulbs flashing, most of them burnt out; marquee tents erected, mirroring ours up the slope; bursts of creepy carnival music drifting up to us as we hang decorations, set tables, test the sound equipment. One of my tasks had been to wrap ribbons around two metal obelisks that would stand at the head of the aisle, to either side of the bride and groom. I worked on them outside on the porch, forgetting that I wasn't wearing sunscreen and failing to notice that half of my body was exposed to the blazing afternoon sun. In some of the wedding photographs you can see that I have a vivid sunburn on *one* arm. If this arm is hidden, you can see the other one that has a giant plaster over the elbow, from falling off my bike earlier in the week. Everything seems like an emblem, I think, and I am not really cut out for this kind of thing — I don't fit — I can't seem to understand the rules, no one gave me a copy of the script.

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84 Turn it backwards
see, see what I mean?
An evol word. & besides
who understands it?
I certainly wouldn't like to go out on that kind of limb.
Amiri Baraka, 'In Memory of Radio', in *Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones* (New York: Morrow, 1979), p.9.

Today, on the way up to the banquet hall, I noticed that the fair had kicked off. Rides spinning, ring-tossers winning, everyone grinning. As we drive past, I crane my neck to see. I have always harboured an abject love for fun fairs, but this one is really like a rural Americana voyeur's wet dream. There is a line of vintage cars with their hoods popped. Someone is walking a pig on a leash. A small boy sees me peering from behind the glass and thrusts his arm out, giving me the finger, while using his other hand to cram the last bite of a huge chilli-cheese-dog into his mouth.

I see a hand-painted sign that says: FIRE-WORKS 2NITE! 10PM!!

Up at the reception, the grey sky and the heavy air are dense with humidity. Instead of lilting by casually on the breeze, as before, the noises of the fair in the distance now sound thick and pervasive, as though they have seeped and oozed, suffused the entire surrounding atmosphere. Sickly sweet cotton candy, laughter shrill with the ominous note of manic amusement park hysteria, strident peals of games chiming win after cheap win.

We are standing in a room that used to be an indoor pool. Stairs lead down to it from the main room of the lower floor, which in its heyday must have been a seriously groovy swingers lounge. You can practically feel the shag carpet, hear the squeak of the faux-leather couches, smell the damp rot of spider ferns. Low ceilings. Dark brown corrugated brick. The 'pool' similarly remains a palimpsest of former times. The floor has been covered over, and two large bars have been installed — one to either side of an aisle that runs down the centre of the room to the door that leads outside to another aisle that ends at an altar.

It feels *damp* to me, this room. Like there is a faint moisture lingering in the air. And it gives the impression of being — I don't know — chlorinated? The floor has been wall-to-wall carpeted in a murky blue carpet, which adds to the watery feeling of the whole affair. The *under*water feeling. Stagnant, cloudy, still. But maybe it's just the humidity of the day, the threatening rain. The pool underneath wasn't filled in, just covered over, so when you walk across the floor it produces a sort of hollow, booming noise — like someone is knocking from beneath, trying to get out. The Tell-Tale Pool. I'm trying not

to think about what might be down there. Did they clean it out completely before covering it? I picture dead leaves crumpled and collected in its corners. Faint water stains running across the basin, blooming brown Rorschach blots. A deflated, abandoned red ball. A set of punctured water wings.

I want a drink, but I still have to give my speech, and I have this recurring vision that when I get up in front of everyone, all of I sudden I will not be able to speak. I will look down for a prompt from my notes, and all of the words will come unstuck from the paper — slip slide across the page, run right off of it and onto the ground. A puddle of words. A heap of language.

I am studiously avoiding my date, who is working the room like it's a business lunch, and at this point in time no longer resembles a person I would say I know.

I keep thinking about the book inside of me. Sometimes when I do this, I absent-mindedly reach my right hand across my chest, middle finger to the small depression where my collarbone meets my left shoulder. There is something hard there that could feel a little bit like the corner of the cover, I think. I remember the boy who flipped me off earlier in the day. Seneca Lake, middle finger extended.

I jump as one of my aunts startles me by putting her hand on my left shoulder from behind. I hadn't seen her approach.

'It was a lovely ceremony, wasn't it!', she says.

I nod, 'yes, it was.'

'And how are you, my dear? Anything special going on in your life?'

I think about the book, about writing. About how much I want both. How they mean so much to me I sometimes think I will expire with longing.

'Oh well, you know — I'm working on it.'

'Someday it will happen for you, I'm sure of it!'

I'm astonished that she could be so sure where I am sometimes so fearful. 'Well, that's nice of you to say', I offer, reluctantly. 'Though sometimes I wonder, really, and it seems to be taking such an awfully long time — to get going, you know, for things to come together, to make sense.'

'You just need to wait until you're all settled', she says, 'then it won't take long — you'll see, everything will fall into place.'

'Well I hope so, it's just that being settled seems such a long way off. Most months I just barely pay my rent, and it feels like I never have the time that I need, not even close.'

'But you'll have someone helping you, of course!', she says, assuredly.

'What do you mean?', I ask. 'Like a wealthy benefactor or something?'

'You never know! A rich husband, maybe!'

Ah yes, the rich husband. Why didn't I think of that. 'Maybe', I say. 'But — all present circumstances aside — I don't really believe in marriage. Sometimes you feel you want to be able do things on your own — you just want to be alone.'

A worried, slightly shocked look crosses her face. 'Oh Emily, you don't want to do it on your own — that's too difficult!'

Now I'm confused. How would I write a book with someone else? Would there be a co-author? Would I have a secretary or a stenographer to whom I might dictate? I'm about to ask when she continues.

'And you know, it always seems like it will take a long time and then nine months later, there you are!'

Where am I nine months later? At a publishers trying to hawk a manuscript? It seems a strange and arbitrary denomination of time.

'Well', I say, 'it's probably going to take me a lot longer than nine months. Maybe one and a half or two years, at least.'

'Oh but you're young', she says, 'you won't have to try for long, it won't be hard.'

'I guess the thing is, being young means you don't have much experience, though, right?'

She looks uncomfortable and blushes a little, doesn't say anything. What on earth is she talking about? Is she completely nuts? Maybe she's drunk? Then I realise.

'Oh — *oh*. Oh dear, well I think that we might be having different conversations here. What are you talking about, exactly?'

'Why a family and a baby, of course!', she grins.

'Ah, yes, I see', I hear myself giggle nervously. 'I thought that might be the case. I was talking about a book — I was talking about writing, about wanting to write a *book*.'

She looks at me blankly.

I decide to cut my losses, knowing that sometimes you just can't explain.

'If you'll excuse me for a moment…'

'Oh of course!', she says brightly. 'You go enjoy yourself, I look forward to hearing your speech later!'

The Speech.
I had forgotten.
I look down at my feet to see if the heap of words is there, dark and tangled. But there is only the murky blue carpet.

I grab two glasses of wine and head for the bathroom that is around the corner and at the end of a long dark hall, where I am sure no one will be. I fumble for the light switch and catch myself staring wildly into the mirror, frozen in the glaring fluorescent lights. I look stunned, like an animal that has just narrowly escaped road kill; like a thief who has avoided a set-up by accidentally showing up late to the heist — everyone else arrested and sentenced to Life.

I steady myself, leaning against the counter. I look at myself head on and scrunch up my nose, just to make sure that it's actually my face — that I have control over how it moves and expresses itself. I stretch my shoulder blades out of my back like tiny wings, and imagine them growing, expanding, spreading — the wingspan unbelievable as I rise and then soar out of this place and up into the sky.

I start laughing, thinking back on the conversation with my aunt, imagining someone pregnant with a book:

'You know, she seemed very square for a pregnant woman. No no – I don't mean straight-laced, I mean — I suppose — well, *geometrically* speaking. It was like a big rectangle, just sticking straight out of her! Like a shelf! They said she drank a glass of red wine every evening, all throughout the pregnancy, and she used her stomach as a table to rest it on in between sips. Gulps, they said: *Gulps*. Could you imagine? It all seems so…French. I heard the birth was very painful.'

I don't think often, if ever, about having a real, human baby. But in this moment, I feel like the fiercest mother — cradling my stack of papers and notes, with their stories and images, promises and listing lists. 'I will never', I whisper, 'ever, let you go.'

Flesh into paper, paper into flesh. The ultimate transubstantiation. You know, I never understood the whole blood into wine thing. Not the alchemy, which seemed oddly straightforward compared to other posited beliefs. Just — where did it all come from, the *blood*. Thousands of years of blood? Surely *no* corpse, holy or otherwise, contains so much blood. And is there a tap in the back of every church that accesses a river of blood that flows like an artery beneath, connecting all places of holy worship?

Yes, well. Who am I to judge, in any case. We all worship at different kinds of altars. We all pray for our very own, our very private, our very meagre benedictions.

Who is we?

You know, us.

What, you and me?

No – (broad circular gesture): us. *Us*.

We are, I know not how, double within ourselves. We are all patchwork, and so shapeless and diverse in composition that each bit, each moment, plays its own game.[85]

I cannot keep my subject still. It goes along befuddled and staggering, with a natural drunkenness.[86]

Mud Woman.

Mud Woman says you can find signs. You can find signs of anything, for anything, if you just look hard enough.

We heard of Mud Woman from miles away. Her loneliness was famous — *her heart was a legend*[87]— the news of it spread through towns, counties, provinces, echoing at a great distance. At times it sounded like the rumble of thunder. At others it was a whisper, a lilting refrain. Sometimes it sounded like nothing at all, and the silence was always greater, more crushing than we expected.

It goes like this, the fourth the fifth.[88]

I crawl through the mud. It is wet, it covers me, cakes thickly on my face as I struggle to stay as close to the ground as possible, wriggling and writhing, squirming forward slowly, quietly. The dank smell fills my nostrils. It is cold and I have to scoop near handfuls of filth out of my eyes in order to see. Everything is low and dark. When you are facedown belly-down so far-down feather-down, it is hard to distinguish this from that; when you are so close to the ground; when you are so low. The mud incorporates all: twigs, leaves, pieces of bark, sand, even small rocks. I am next, you think. I am next. Creature feature. You get ready for your close-up.

The minor fall, the major lift.[89]

Mud Woman leaves lists all over the place. Tangles of words like brambles, her thorny writing scratches here and there across bits of torn paper. They seem to appear from

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85 Michel de Montaigne, 'On the inconstancy of our actions', in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. by Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), p.244.

86 Michel de Montaigne, 'On repenting', in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, p.613.

87 Leonard Cohen, 'Famous Blue Raincoat', *Songs of Love and Hate* (Columbia, C30103, 1971)

88 Leonard Cohen, 'Hallelujah', *Various Positions* (Columbia, CK66950, 1984)

89 Ibid.

nowhere, slipping out of cracks in the walls, from behind the bookshelf, under the stove. They sit quietly in the corners, exhaling scattered sprays of baby's breath — white carnations — funeral flowers.

Pleistocene stratigraphy. Invertebrate fossils: Insecta, Trichoptera, Diptera, Coleoptera.

Geomorphology. Coastal Geomorphology. Tectonic Geomorphology.[90]

The Escarpment.
The Marine Scarp.
The Scarp of the Valleys.
The Earthen Scarp.
The Southern Scarp.[91]

Sometimes there are entire passages copied from books. We try to understand what she is reading and why. We think we'll ask her, if we can catch her, but it takes so long for her to emerge again that we forget all of our questions.

Rock, moss, and tree compositions of great beauty can be found anywhere on the talus slopes of the exposed scarp.

Ps. this road is not maintained in winter.

Driving systematically on the many roads that cross the Escarpment, I would sometimes be at its foot and other times on top of it. In many areas where the rock is broken and earth-covered, it is not at all obvious where the scarp face itself begins and ends.

In some highly dissected areas where glacial debris covers the rock, a sense of enclosure was a distinguishing sign. A seasoned traveller of the Escarpment lands eventually develops a sixth sense which tells him when he is into Escarpment terrain.[92]

I wake with a feeling of distance from myself, my head full of images and sequences that are simultaneously vivid and indistinct. I am surprised, feeling sure I had been dreaming something else entirely, and now confused at what I can recall — I do not know where or when or to whom any of this happened. In which reality. Was it the dreamlife or the waking? The remembered or the imagined? The purloined or the personal? And where and how did these intersect to produce this — this lucid liminality? And for how long do

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90 Thomas Bolton, *Silurian Stratigraphy and Palaeontology of the Niagara Escarpment in Ontario* (Ottawa, ON: Geological Survey of Canada, 1957), p.17.

91 Richard Kosydar, *Natural landscapes of the Niagara escarpment* (Dundas, ON: Tierceron Press, 1996), p. 20.

92 Ibid, p.80.

these questions matter; how long does it make a difference if something was real or not, if someone — if anyone — believes that it was?

Surface area, about *14,600,000 square miles*

Distance in miles (mean) *238,840 miles*
Distance, maximum *252,972 miles*
Distance, minimum *221,614 miles*[93]

When, at what point, and for how long do you look at something before it gets inside of you? How long before it goes even deeper, down through your guts to your feet, and spills out into your shadow that flickers and stretches this way and that, a pool of darkness only visible in certain lights. Then how long before you *are* it? And finally, it is *you*?

Mud Woman lets people come close, but not *that* close. Your best bet is to approach while she's eating — she is so hungry all of the time that she doesn't notice. She is *ravenous* — she is all consuming. If you get near enough, she might look up and make eye contact. But she will never offer her hand.

Ovid.
Scipio.
Burdett.
Naples.
Lodi.
Dundee.
Dresden.
Romulus.
Genoa.
Alpine.
Erin.
Alpsburg.[94]

I followed her one day, Mud Woman. I followed her out across the fields and into the woods. She knew I was there and stopped to turn around and look at me every once in a while, but then she would turn back around and keep walking. I took this to mean she didn't mind. We walked for a long time. I had no idea the woods were so deep. We

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93 Thomas Gwyn Elger, *The Moon. A full description and map of its principal physical features* (London: G. Philip & Sons, 1895), pp.168-169.

94 Oskar Deitrich Von Engeln, *The Finger Lakes Region: its origin and nature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), p.28.

found two dead swans. Mud Woman cut them open, belly to long, elegant throat, and started to fill them with flowers. I helped her. I don't know where all the blossoms came from, but there seemed no end to them — each time I reached out, my empty hands were filled. A benediction. Begonias in their beaks, abundant, brimming dead things they were. I looked at Mud Woman and she looked at me. She reached into her mouth, hand going deeper and deep, and pulled out a fistful of roses. *Careful of the thorns*, I whispered, but she just laughed.

Sometimes Mud Woman whispers to me at night. I feel bad because she seems upset, only I can never quite hear what she is saying. Her mouth is full of mud. But there is a rhythm to it, a refrain.

sea of crisis
sea of fecundity
sea of cold
sea of moisture
sea of showers
sea of cleverness
sea of islands
see of the edge
sea of nectar
sea of clouds
sea of serenity
sea of waves
sea of vapours
ocean of storms[95]

Mud Woman left a note saying she was possessed, so not to worry if I felt anything strange overtaking me during the night: it was just one of her demons taking a quick look around, perusing the other goods available. It wouldn't last long, she said, because they always come back — they always return to her.

Mud Woman seemed like magic to us. We loved her because she was so special; there was something impossible to describe that drew us to her in a naïve sort of wonder. But she was breaking all of the time, and you could never tell when it was going to happen. She was always breaking, and it was violent and frightening, so that sometimes, we had to admit later, we wanted nothing to do with her at all.

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95 Elger, p.85.

Mud Woman is beautiful, we would say. But she is crazy, I mean really really *crazy*. You should be careful.

'Isn't there any body you want back from
the grave? We were less generous in our time.'
*-- Palinarus (*not *Cyril Connolly)*

Well,
it is better
that

O M E O N
S love them E
and we
so seldom look on love
that it seem heinous.[96]

Mud Woman gives it all away for free, even though we tell her it's not a good idea, you have to hold onto something for yourself. She doesn't care. She doesn't say as much, but we can tell from the look in her eyes, the way she walks — she stares you, she marches you straight down. Because it is the giving and not the given that is the gift to the giver — the deed, the experience. It is the action that is the claim-staking, the long-walk, the moon-landing on the bald, inhospitable shores that lie outside of the self. The less evidence you leave, the fewer footprints, the more successful you have been.

Send a signal of smoke out into the air when only you are there to see it. Don't take a photograph. Seeing it is enough. It *is* enough. Or at least thinking, for that split second, that it *could* be.

Mud Woman does all the things I wish I could do but probably never will. Mud Woman sees what she wants and she really goes for it. If Life is a Sport, Mud Woman is never a Spectator.

Mud Woman knows things about people. She is always watching and collecting stories; she remembers everything. She doesn't think any detail is tiny or insignificant. She says life is made up of moments. They don't stack up or string together to mean something. It's just — Moment. Moment. Moment. You have to pay attention.

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96 Frank O'Hara, 'Ode on Necrophilia', in *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p.279

ex caelo
ex avibus
ex tripudiis
ex quadrupedibus
ex diris[97]

Observation is porous with osmosis, and we are fragile in our contemplations, our thinly concealed, panting efforts. Translation is riddled with amnesia; it is pockmarked and pitted. It is honeycombed. We are lanced, we are broidered. Sweet intricate lattice work. Desire's craftsmen are nimble tailors, carpenters, handymen, henchmen.

Her talents and the brilliance of her mind contended with the strength of the emptiness.[98]

Mud Woman comes to me in a dream. She warns: Some things take you out of yourself and they never put you back in. It is a mistake to try to make other people understand this. You will only feel betrayed. You must walk this road alone. She looks at me, nods gravely, then shrugs, turns on her heel and disappears. She looks at me like if she stays here in front of me, I will light her on fire. I realise that I have seen this look on other people's faces before. It is a surprise every time, since I always assume that it is I who have something to be afraid of.

Coastal geomorphology.
Light absorbing components in the Fingers Lakes of NY.
Fundamental and applied liminology.[99]

We are not all the same, says Mud Woman. And I almost believe her.

But you were my mother.[100]

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97 The five different types of auspices in ancient times: from the sky, from birds, from the 'dance' (of birds feeding), from quadrupeds, from portents.

98 Elizabeth Hardwick, 'Billie Holiday', *The New York Review of Books*, 23.3 (1976) <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1976/mar/04/billie-holiday/> [accessed 15 December 2013]

99 Kammen, Carol, *The Finger Lakes of New York* (Utica, NY: North Country Books, 2001), p.73.

100 Denis Johnson, 'Work', in *Jesus' Son* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), p. 68.

I am thankful that this pond was made deep and pure for a symbol.[101]

Ghosts.

All summer, I wrote hardly anything at all. Three months, and nothing to show for it. I had held such high hopes. I brought home two blank notebooks, along with the one I was presently writing in.

See — here's one — I carried it all the way to Ottawa, and then all the way back to London without inking a single page. See this? Look closely. There is a faint shadow across the cover. The dark rectangle of another book that sat across it at a slight angle where it lay on the floor all summer, next to the window. All of the time that I was *not* writing. Memorialised here in this shady book cover photogram.

Absence makes the heart grow fodder.

No — fonder. *Fonder.*

What book was it, sitting atop, I wonder? It could have been any number of tomes, stacked there in accusatory silence. All of the promises I pulled out of storage boxes, full of ambition for a summer of reading.

Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts.
What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.
My Heart is Broken.
The Violent Bear it Away.

Hard to say which volume cast this particular shadow, or any other for that matter.

We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.[102]

Yes, I agree. True. How straight the line, though, how even the keel — steady the course! — depends on the individual, depends on the story at hand.

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101 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings*, ed. by Joseph Wood Krutch (New York: Bantam, 1962), p.331

102 Joan Didion, 'The White Album', in *The White* Album (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), p. 11.

As a writing man, or secretary, I have always felt charged with the safe-keeping of all unexpected items of worldly or unworldly enchantment, as though I might be held personally responsible if even a small one were to be lost.[103]

Yes, I agree. True.

It's an awful lot of pressure though, isn't it?

Language, writing gives us tools to fill in the gaps. If we will make some concessions. If we will bargain on its terms — those of voice, narrative, character, description. And plot. Don't lose the plot. Oh, dreaded plot. Rising action, climax, denouement. Sometimes you can get away without paying too much attention to it. But people get confused. They want to know where things are *going*.

We ought to stop, every once in a while and look into these methods, these methodologies. Stories are never just stories. They are greater than themselves; they are concepts, too. Concepts whole and contained — treasure boxes, hope chests, strongholds, vaults. Houses, buildings, cities, worlds of words that open and unfold — treacherous, gilded, incandescent origami tightropes that beckon and stretch across the abyss. Who would *not* want to walk across. Who would not dream of getting halfway to the other side and lying down for a spell, feeling the weight of gravity as though all of the air was solid and the body alone incorporeal. From there, where would you go? Back to the side that you came from? Or to the one opposite, the one that beckons?

I didn't set out to write about shadows and ghosts. But in some ways it feels impossible to avoid the sense of being haunted. Every narrative is fraught with mythologies, ancient inheritance, eerie topographies, *deep holes*.

As though there are secrets to being in a place.
As though the stories places leave behind resonate unequivocally into the present.
As though narratives unlock, provide answers to things.

Always tracing backwards, always looking for connections.

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103 E.B. White, 'The Ring of Time', in *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*, ed. by Philip Lopate (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), p.539.

Before the wedding — before the lakes, before the fingers snake their way into my brain, full of contradicting currents and waves — I read about geology. Who can argue with the science of land-formation? Lots of people, I suppose, mainly on a theological basis. But let's just say, for the sake of argument. The writing in them is terrible, though. Misplaced modifiers. Run-on sentences, paragraphs, pages. Whole sequences with no verbs, all wrong accords. Perhaps scientists of the earth speak in a different language? There are other origin tales of the Finger Lakes region. The history of the Iroquoian Nations, for instance, their beliefs about the formation of the earth and its geographical features, its strange abundances. These are nearly impossible to find: there are no books. No one writes about them. Or perhaps they are the kinds of tales that are, simply, not written.

I think that if we don't have our own legends, we borrow. We pinch and we pilfer from other people. And if we *do* have our own legends, we supplant those that exist parallel, or in contradiction. We replace them: we map, we compass, we encompass. Until a more recognisable, a more amenable landscape emerges. I distrust the practice, even as I participate in it myself. It is one that is informed by privilege — an understanding of place as inherently unwritten when we arrive at them.

I read about geology and I thought, if only someday I could write something great.

If only someday I might feel that these names, these stories, these histories that have come before me — an anxiety of influence — will help instead of hinder.

These lists will buoy instead of weight and drag.

Someday.

'I will put it more clearly, the person who loves beautiful things loves; why does he love?'
And I said, 'To possess them for himself.'
'But that answer requires a question of this sort: what will he have when he possesses beautiful things?'
And I said that I wasn't able to answer this question at all readily.

Socrates, 'Happiness', *Plato's Symposium* (204d4-10)

The Bluffs #3.

It was turning into a summer of looking. Everyone was looking for things. Everyone *is* looking for things. The days were suffused with a directionless heat of wanting, sticky fingers clutching the edges of the mind, leaving everything covered in a mess of dirty fingerprints.

I had not heard from the Guild. My notes were a hulking disgrace. I hadn't been writing. My stomach was in knots. I had broken a small bone in my right foot and it felt like everywhere I went I was wincing. I was wincing around the city. Wincing the days away.

I do not see the whole of anything…Nor do those who promise to show it to us.[104]

At least the essay was still talking to me — we were on speaking terms. Only I was having a little trouble with balance. And not just because of my foot injury.

On the one hand there was Mendieta and the *Labyrinth*, drawing me in. I was fascinated, obsessed. On the other hand was the essay and its ever growing chorus of essayists — no matter how much I read, the voices just kept multiplying, a panharmonicon that I couldn't figure out how to tune, never mind play. And in the middle, at the centre of it all, there was me, trying desperately to give voice and form to the shifting phantasmagoria — to find the I at the centre of the storm.

William Gass writes of the essay, that 'it turns round and round upon its topic, exposing this aspect and then that; proposing possibilities, reciting opinions, disposing of prejudice and even the simple truth itself'.[105] Turn round and round, yes, the importance, the liberation of dimensionality. Only I felt like I was turning pretty fast, and my centre wasn't going to hold. Like instead of spinning the yarn, the yarn was spinning me. I was not Theseus, with his clever thread, but rather the beast that lay waiting at the centre of the search — pulsing with violence and frustration. A caged beast. *And that I seek, like*

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104 Michel de Montaigne, 'Of Democrtius and Heraclitus', in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, p.219.

105 William Gass, 'Emerson and the Essay', in *Habitations of the Word* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), p. 32.

such a beast, with my little strength, such a beast.[106] That kind of burning stasis will drive you mad.

I wanted to write something important, something meaningful. But everything that came out felt like a meander, ranging and incomplete. How did I know, and was it even possible to test the notion that all of the stories and reminiscences and tangents that had risen to the surface and cast lines in between the lines actually belonged, that they made any sense at all? To me, they added texture and meaning, said — within a different province of language and content — what I sometimes couldn't explain. It felt like a cheap trick, but it also felt true; I suppose the two aren't necessarily mutually exclusive. But still, I was worried about being illegitimate — an amateur, half-schooled, self-absorbed.

I believed Oscar Wilde, who said that we should flee 'the dim, dull abyss of fact'.[107] But I also believed Schlegel, who advised, 'to have a system or not to have one – both are equally deadly for the mind. One has little choice but to combine the two'.[108] And like Robert Burton, I too wanted to be 'aliquis in omnibus, nullus in singulis'[109] — a somebody in general, a nobody in particular. Part of the problem was that nothing felt solid. I had dug myself a giant pit filled with words and books and images. But I didn't know, I couldn't put my finger, couldn't get my hands on what I was really working with. I needed to find a way to combine the experimental with the empirical, the fragmentary with the complete — the essay with the system.

So I booked a train ticket to Toronto. I thought — fuck this, I am going to go find this thing. I am not afraid of the minotaur: I *am* the minotaur. Hear me…roar? I'm not sure what sound *such a beast* makes.

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106 Samuel Beckett, *The Unnameable*, in *A Samuel Beckett Reader*, ed. by John Calder, 2 (London: Pan Books, 1983), p.183.

107 Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', in *Collected Works of Oscar Wilde* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1997), p.975.

108 Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel, 'Athenaeum Fragment no. 53.', as cited in Walter Benjamin, 'The Concept of Criticism', *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 1913-1926*, ed. by Marcus Paul Bullock [et. al.], 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p.140.

109 Robert Burton, 'Democritus to the Reader', *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 11th edn, 2 (London: J. and E. Hodson, 1806), p.3.

Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy.[110]

Years ago, I lived in Toronto. My apartment was a short walk from the Rosedale Ravine Lands, which link up to the Don Valley River. One day, I found a small set of stairs hidden under the edge of an overpass. If you crouched low and scuttled down the steps, you arrived at a narrow snaking path that ran along the top of the ravine — a clear shot view of trees and scrub that stretched for what seemed like eternity into the long, deep crevasse. In the winter, everything was brushed empty, whipped clean and bare by the wind. No matter the season, there always seemed to be a strew of detritus: street signs and notices, tangles of clothing, plastic bags, empty bottles and cans, the usual garbage. The ravine runs through different lengths of the city, and I always imagined the accumulation of things lost and tangled would change along its progression, reflecting each demographic of the city through which it passed. Though, in reality, garbage — the discarded — is relatively universal. I always wanted to go down, I mean really DOWN — into the valley V of it — and walk the whole thing, right through the city from east to west. I never did. Perhaps I felt the ravine was better as a shadowy, marginal figure, with its deep crevasse full of conjectures that would never have to bear the burden of cataloguing or permanence, the kind of proofs that attend deliberate observation.

This time, I thought, I am more interested in geology than geography. The layers of things. The strata. The creatures frozen therein. A moment preserved in all its clear, fossilized contours. What was it that I thought I would find? We want, perhaps, things like ravines, fault lines, bluffs to mean more than they really do.

Metaphors always present a process of abstraction. They never represent it. It is about the interaction of symbols – which is where they gain their meaning, possessing none independently.[111]

On the train, I turn my head so it is as close to equal with the window as possible; so it is one side flat, one ear against. Like I am one with the side of the train, and it is I who curve and shine along the rails, cutting through the outskirts of the dirty city towards its centre. Smooth and assured, I am radiant in my direction — how absolutely, how purposefully I press forward.

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110 Aristotle, '1457b', in *Poetics*, ed. by John Baxter and Patrick Atherton (Montreal, QC; Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), p.150.

111 William Gass, *A Philosophical Investigation of Metaphor* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Cornell University, 1954), p.77.

A little girl bounces on a trampoline. I see only her upper body as it appears — now, again, now, again — above the fence line of her backyard. Her thin blond ponytail is like a light switch that flicks up every time her body goes back down. Its rat-tailed end is the last thing I see of each bounce as she disappears from view — now, again, now, again. Pulling through town, a red-haired boy, a teenager with a teenaged slouch, posture of the bored and vulnerable, lobs honeydew melons into a dumpster behind the Giant Tiger. We carry on past. Past the sad chain-link fences that sag against the tracks with their fleshy, exposed bellies of torn plastic bags, rusted old cans, parts of broken, disused machines.

I am worried about time, about timing. I had planned to take the first train in and the last train out, but I missed the 8am ride and the next was at noon. Where I would have had 9 hours, I will now have 4 1/2, maybe 5. I'm also worried about the light. The visibility conditions. I need to get to the Bluffs before it starts to get dark, before the cliff casts a long shadow over itself and makes it too difficult to read the surface of the rock face clearly. These days, too, the temperature has dropped. As soon as the sun starts to lower, the air begins to nip and then bite with the frosty edge of approaching autumn. There is a clarity to the sun at that time of day, but it is one that warns: change is on the horizon. Fall, we call it in Canada; not Autumn, *fall*. Fall comes in golds and reds, oranges and yellows, but it does not suffer fools gladly. Fall swoops hard and fast. Fall cuts you off at the knees.

The train car I'm on is relatively empty, so I am surprised when someone sits down right next to me. It is an older man, maybe 70 years old. There is an odd look to his eyes. He grins at me. He is missing two teeth. Not the front ones, but close enough that there is a rather prominent gap when he smiles, like a third eye staring you down.

'Hi!', he says, 'I'm Gary!'

'Hi, I'm Emily', I reply, trying to look him in the eyes rather than the mouth.

'Great handshake!', he says.

For the next 80 minutes, he talks straight at me. A stream of words, his whole life story as the countryside flies by outside the window of the train, the car flashing with green and gold shot through with blue.

Gary used to be a heavy drinker. His wife divorced him. His son disowned him. He worked on the stock market. He had a lot of money. He thought material possessions were very important. He had cars. He had a condo on the waterfront. He was estranged from his whole family. His parents died, and he didn't even go to their funerals. I had it all you know, he said, or I thought I did. Now I know that I had nothing. One day, Gary was in a terrible car accident. Drinking and driving. He suffered severe head trauma. He lost his memory. He didn't know anything. Where he was. Who he was. Where he had been. Did he have any family. What was his name. Everything was gone — his brain had been wiped clean. For four months, he lay in a hospital bed, not knowing anything at all. He didn't even have an emergency contact: he had erased all of his own index points even before his brain had erased his memories. Finally, one of his estranged brothers came to visit. This brother hadn't wanted to come, but the doctors begged: you never know what will jog the memory, what small detail will make everything fall into place.

Finally it came back to him. Everything came back, slowly. He was ashamed. He had to change his life. I mean, he really *had* to change his life. He now needed to be in assisted living. He could not form new memories. He couldn't stop talking, he didn't have an 'Off-Button'.

Because essays are directly concerned with the mind and the mind's idiosyncrasy, the very freedom the mind possesses is bestowed on this branch of literature that does honour to it, and the fascination of the mind is the fascination of the essay.[112]

The essay reveals the movement of thought itself as it encounters the object or subject at hand. As Gass writes, the essay is 'the mind in the marvels and miseries of its making, the search for form'.[113] All summer, I had embraced this notion as a kind of liberty. Not that it's in any way simple to explain or even to apprehend on a basic level what is going on in your mind, not to mention the deep holes and the darkness that can rear up; sometimes there is enough time to jump aside to avoid injuring yourself, but other times you know

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112 Edward Hoagland, 'What I Think, What I Am', in *The Tugman's Passage* (New York: Random House, 1982), p.27.

113 William Gass, 'Emerson and the Essay', p.18.

that there's no escaping: you just have to go *down*. But this, in itself, felt like freedom to me — that if you are brutally honest about what and how and why you think, then you get to make up your own rules. And if you're lucky, you eventually find the language to describe them. But sitting here with Gary I wonder at the audacity of humans; the notion that a literary form could somehow harness and make sense of the mind. It seemed to me that the brain and the mind alike would always be full of mysterious failures and miracles, phenomena incomprehensible and beyond our control. I knew that the essay was supposed to embrace these difficulties — break into pieces — stop abruptly — begin again — show the holes and the misrememberings and the fear of being lost and the weird connections and the magical thinking and and and —

But I still felt a little foolish.

'Emily', Gary says to me, 'Emily, you just tell me if I am talking your ear off. My friends, in my support group, they have this sign that they do to tell me — Gary, I've had enough. It's like this', and he holds out his two hands flat in front of him, palms down, and makes a pressing motion, angling them up and then down, hinging at the wrists. Like how you might press on a sewing machine lever, or the sostenuto pedal of a piano, but with his hands.

There is something so strange and childlike about it that I am mesmerised and forget to say, you know, maybe it would be good if we took a break from the talking now, and so he goes ahead and carries on before I can stop him. He tells me that he has been sitting in on the lectures at the university in Kingston. His favourite is history. Ancient History. Egypt. From his room, at the assisted living centre, he has a clear view of a wide expanse of green fields outside. Fields and trees, and the edge of Lake Ontario beyond. He has a desk in front of the window, where he sits and reads. On the wall opposite, are posters of Nefertiti, his favourite Goddess. She looks over his shoulder and sees what he sees. She watches over him.

I am speechless and captivated by Gary and his winking smile. I can see hovering in front of me the constellation of things, the essay that constitutes this man and his life. It feels like a gift that he has told me all of these things, even if it's only the result of a neurological disorder.

It seems like a sad point to cut him off, but we will be in Scarborough in 20 minutes, and I need to look over my notes to make sure I know where I am going, how I will use my time. 'Gary', I say, and make the hand motion — approximating his demonstration as best possible. 'Of course! Of course. You enjoy your trip dear. Be good to your grandmother.' He has already forgotten my reasons for visiting Scarborough and has assumed, for whatever reason, that it is to visit my grandmother. 'I will, Gary, I will. Thanks very much. You take care of yourself!'

I wave and say goodbye once more when I walk past him later, on my way off of the train. His eyes have that strange look again, and I can tell he has no idea who I am.

From Guildwood station, I catch the Lakeshore East train to the Scarborough GO station. The Scarborough Bluffs park is about 20 minutes' walk south to the lakeshore. I have never been to Scarborough before. Everything is very—ordinary.

When I finally get to Scarborough Bluffs Park, I make my way quickly to the edge of the cliff to get a view out over the lake before heading down to the shoreline. I imagine that below this body of water stretch the 12 Finger Lakes from earlier in the summer. Tears from a giant eye, abraded into the face of the earth. Or maybe it is a closed eye and the fingers are its lashes, resting softly on the cheek below. Either way, there is a scrutiny, a scopophilia, a significance to it. And here I am looking for the shape, the form, the absent body. Here at this peerless, peering welled-up eye of the earth woman, as the night falls blind and I can begin to feel a chill in the air. The sun is still up, but she lances on an angle—in at the sides, at the corners of my eyes.

But I still have time, I know I do. I head through the grass, down a slope to the shore — the blue of the lake seems endless in the distance beyond.

I keep picturing the work, the *Labyrinth of Venus*.

Form is never more than an extension of content.[114]

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114 Robert Creeley, as cited in Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse', in *Charles Olson: Collected Prose*, ed. by Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p.138.

Yes — the form of something takes shape as the process of composing it is already underway. Like in the German Idealist Tradition, *Darstellung*: thought is inseparable from its mode of presentation.

Circles encircled in circles. Oblongs oblonged in oblongs.

I imagine for a moment that I have made a grave error. There are no human figures in the images I have of *The Labyrinth of Venus*. What if it is tiny! No bigger than a thumbprint! A sleight of hand, a trick of the eye — wink wink. No matter how significant the search, I would never be able to locate such a small thing on this vast expanse.

I have been taking my time, moving slowly, in spite of the dying light. Is it that I want the moment to go on? If I spend more time, if I think and look as hard as I can, if I pay my impoverished homage, will my needy and borrowed temporality revisit and reinvest the piece with a greater meaning? Will my devotion turn back time?

But moments do end, don't they. Single things come to stand in for them. Indices, indexes of remembering. We must learn to bear gracefully the pain of finality. I would be lying if I didn't say I think that writing, that the *essay* — with all of its striving fragmentation — might be a kind of middle ground. Adorno writes that 'the mind is indeed not capable of producing or grasping the totality of the real, but it may be possible to penetrate the detail, to explode in miniature the mass of merely existing reality'.[115] The essay as form respects the absolute complexity of the object and dismisses the pretence that thought can achieve any kind of total comprehension. In so doing, it makes space for a more sensitive method of philosophical interpretation, one that fundamentally requires an element of imaginative freedom. The essay wants to understand and it wants to describe, but it refuses to simplify the process by providing a systematic method by which to do so. The essay knows that it doesn't know. The object itself is a contradiction, and so the essay is structured 'in such a way that it could always,

115 Theodor Adorno, 'The Actuality of Philosophy', in *Working Papers in Cultural Studies: On Ideology*, 10 (1977), pp.120-133 (p.133).

at any point, break off. It thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented, and gains its unity only by moving through fissures, rather than by smoothing them over.'[116]

The essay is determined by the unity of its object, together with that of theory and experience which have migrated into the object.[117]

I have studied the photographs so many times that I have memorised every nuance, every curve, every line — depression, jut, gouge, gradient, groin, groove, fission, sediment, strata — everything, but *everything* about the bluff. The blind man's bluff. The earth-woman's wink. In my mind, it faces me head on, bald-faced, bare and shameless. In person, now, I look carefully and I wait. I wait for it to reveal itself to me.

I think of what Mendieta said before going to Cuba to make the Rupestrian sculptures, 'I was afraid before I went [to Cuba], because I thought "here I've been living my life with this obsessive thing in my mind – what if I find out it has nothing to do with me?" But the minute I got there, it was this whole thing of *belonging* again.'[118]

I stood there, weighing the two things. What is it that I expected to find here? A sense of belonging, or finding out that it has nothing to do with me? The two seem of equal import, equal appeal.

Am I a masochist if I came all this way to find nothing *on purpose*? What am I doing here, sliding down this rocky path as the sun sets? As the bluffs begin to cast shadows on themselves, obscuring their faces in a shade of early evening blue. What do I want?

I think about Gary and how, at one point in our conversation, he lifted his baseball cap to show me a soft place on his skull where there was no longer any bone beneath the skin. 'My brain is right under there', he said. All I had managed in reply was, 'cool'. I felt as though I could see the skin breathing and fluttering like butterfly wings, so thin, so delicate a membrane over such an important organ. Perhaps he was no longer so careful

116 Theodor Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', p.164.
117 Ibid, p.165.
118 Blocker, p.101.

with his brain, knowing it was already so full of holes. 'Do you want to touch it?', he had asked.

As I clambered down to the strip of land at the edge of water, heading to a path that runs along the base of the bluffs, I couldn't stop thinking about Mendieta's death. About Carl Andre's trial, and ultimately his acquittal. The details of it have been haunting me for months.

What happened was we had — my wife is an artist and I'm an artist, and we had a quarrel about the fact that I was more, uh, exposed to the public than she was and she went to the bedroom and I went after her and she went out of the window.[119]

Later he said he had been watching television in the other room, didn't hear anything, and then came into the bedroom to find the window open and her gone. Even though there were scratches all over his face, and the doorman heard a woman repeatedly yelling, pleading, 'No no no no no!', just before Mendieta plummeted to her death. She was wearing only a pair of underwear.

She went out the window.

She went out the window?
She went shopping.
She went to the bank.
She went to Mexico and lay in a grave not to feel death or to die but to feel the earth, to understand the ground.

But the window? She went out the window? The verb isn't even convincing, never mind the motivation.

She went out the window.

In court, the defence argued that it had been a suicide, using Mendieta's own work as exhibits: her art revealed that she had wanted to die. Because it contained blood. The

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[119] Transcript from Andre's 911 telephone call, as cited in Robert Katz, *Naked by the Window: The Fatal Marriage of Carl Andre and Ana Mendieta* (New York: Grove Press, 1990), p.11.

depressions of bodies she made in the earth provided a perfect parallel for the depression her body made in the awning of the deli at ground level, 34 floors below. The siluetas foreshadowed her literal end.

They said that she wanted it. People are always saying that about women.

She wanted to go to bed. I wanted to watch TV… I don't know, maybe I should have gone to bed with her if that's what she wanted. In that sense, maybe I did kill her.[120]

What about all of the early pieces she did, painful tableaus that were intended to confront domestic threat and violence against women?

I guess she wanted that too?

Foreshadowed. Even the word sounds like a hazy lie. You would need to have the sun behind you. And of course, shadows are hard to come by at nighttime.

It is a challenge to accept that life, writing, making any kind of meaning involves a struggle that will potentially yield nothing concrete. But at least there is the option. The option to struggle, to seek, to desire, to essay — to do any and all of the things that remind us we are human — that we aren't *there* yet: that you can, that you must change your life.

I felt a white hot rage. I felt like screaming at the sheer bluffs that seemed to mock me with their faceless peering.

These obsessive acts of reasserting my ties with the earth are really a manifestation of my thirst for ***being.***[121]

Where is the real resonance? In the self or in the landscape? In the idea? No ideas but in things? We have the sense that certain things belong together, are linked in ways that we might not recognise at first. Someone must volunteer, elect herself to look closely, to draw it out, to capture it for us to see. Bracket. Bracket. Bracket. Click.

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120 Carl Andre, statement to police at the scene of the crime, as cited in Katz, p.3.

121 Moure, p.51.

I guess I thought it would be simple. That I could just compare the pictures I had with what was in front of me, and it would be easy to find — everything would line up.

But the walk to the Bluffs took longer than I anticipated, and by the time I arrived, the dusky light made it difficult to see anything clearly. Additionally, the path along the shore didn't extend as far as I had thought: much of the actual cliff face drops directly into the water, there is no clear way to access parts of the bluff unless you wade or swim over, depending how deep the water is. I suppose I could have guessed, given Mendieta's predilection for sites of natural erosion. Not to mention that the photographs I had were from 1982.

The truth is that organic things, if allowed, eventually, effortlessly fade and then disappear entirely. It is not they, not the earth that cares for preservation. It is we only, grasping humans, who demand such unnatural legacy. Perhaps we ruin many things by attempting to make them last forever. Perhaps we forget that we too are organic, we are of the same biology, the same entropic matter.

The past months had generated for me a sort of cosmogony that I wasn't ready to give up on just yet. It felt weak but true to admit this. That I needed something that might not exist, having partially convinced myself along the way that I was some kind of Realist — studied and objective, heartless, even, when called for. As though it was more reasonable to demand something that couldn't be given from an object rather than a person. Maybe I wasn't cut out for the whole 'negative capability' thing — 'that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason'.[122] Maybe I wasn't a real essayist at all if my mind wasn't strong enough to sustain uncertainty, if it couldn't bear injustice without crumbling under the pressure, or turning inwards and destroying itself.

Or maybe it was all about form, in the end. Drag your palm flat against the rocks. Form would show me the way. Steady yourself. If I just kept going. Feel every nuance, every groove and gradient. If I just kept essaying. Claim the rock. The essay as form.

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122 John Keats, 'Letter to George and Tom Keats, 21 /27 (?) December 1817', in *Selected Letters of John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 60.

Ambitious work doesn't resolve contradictions in spurious harmony but instead embodies the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure.[123]

123 Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.19.

The Falls.

In my dreams I waltz the line all the way out across the falls where the water crashes below. I wish these dreams would stay and let me have them for longer, but they are just shadowy accessories to waking, lingering interlopers, morning mournings. I think — what were you in your other life, you sleepdreaming wake of awake, you torrent of a thing. How we court gravity. How we wake and feel the spray still on our faces.

Annie Edison Taylor.
24 October 1901, on her 63rd birthday, became the first person to survive a trip over the Niagara Falls in a barrel. She carried her lucky heart-shaped pillow. She thought the stunt would would secure a fortune on which she could live for the rest of her life. Her manager stole the barrel and she spent most of her money hiring detectives to try to recover it. They finally found it in Chicago, but some time after, the barrel disappeared again — this time, forever. And so Annie ended up posing for photographs with tourists. She tried to make money on the New York Stock Exchange. She worked as a psychic. She gave magnetic therapy to locals. She attempted to reconstruct her famous 1901 plunge for a film that was never seen. She wanted to write a novel. At the end of it all, she said: 'If it was with my dying breath, I would caution anyone against attempting the feat… I would sooner walk up to the mouth of a cannon, knowing it was going to blow me to pieces than to make another trip over the Falls.'[124]

Before her, Maria Spelterini.
8 July, 1876. The first, and only, woman to cross the Niagara Falls on a tightrope.
They said it seemed like she loved life, like she was a fundamentally happy person. You would have to be, wouldn't you, to put so much faith in it. Tightrope walking across Niagara Falls. Forwards, backwards. With wicker baskets on your feet. Hand- and foot-cuffed. Blindfolded.

The Falls.

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124 Annie Edison Taylors, as cited in Cheryl MacDonald, *Niagara Daredevils: Thrills and Spills over Niagara Falls* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 2003), p.63.

I fall
You fall
He falls
She falls
We fall
They fall

That's what makes me clumsy. Desire for love.[125]

Tombe.
Je tombe.

Are they annoying after a while? The rhymes, the lists? Words are always listing, and lists are always running; jokes are always punning. See — I can't help it. It just comes out that way.

She is *operito*.

125 *Wings of Desire*, dir. by Wim Wenders (Road Movies Filmproduktion; Westdeutscher Rundfunk, 1987)

Then I told Miss Locey the name for what had happened, what that thing that happened diving was called, that divers called it 'rapture of the deep'. And she said what I had always thought, which is that it's odd — it's eerie — when a bad thing has a pretty name.
She said it herself. She said, 'Rapture of the deep'. She said it sounded to her 'like a dive into Liberace's coat, staying under too long, and coming up coughing rubies and pearls.'[126]

Rapture of the deep.

I don't feel well. I don't feel well, at all.

I haven't written in weeks. I don't write and I don't write and I don't write until I think I'm going to explode, until I think I'm going vomit, to throw all of my insides write up.

Sorry, I meant right up.
Right-side up.
(Wrong-side down?)

My stomach flip-flops a drunken waltz of first aching and then sharp and sharper pain. WHY, I think, WHY? If only I could write. I just know that some kind of understanding would arrive and, with it, the pain would depart. I can feel the book inside my chest straining to get out. If it manages to open its front cover, it'll be curtains for me — everything — the whole unedited mess will pour out, a veritable deluge, a torrent of phrases that will never be re-joined.

I try to remind myself, as often as possible, that we must work with, rather than against, our shortcomings.

We rightly scorn those who have not made use of their deficiencies, and have not been enriched by their losses, as we despise any man who does not suffer at being a man or simply at being…Malfunctions of our organs determine the fruitfulness of our minds: the man who does not feel his body will never be in a position to conceive a living thought.[127]

But how to harness something when you feel it is always riding *you*, heavy on your hide, sweaty and chafing under the saddle? Do we buck and throw it off, or do we try to move

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126 Amy Hempel, 'Rapture of the Deep', in *The Dog of the Marriage: The Collected Short Stories* (London: Quercus, 2009), p. 127.
127 E.M. Cioran, 'The Second-Hand Thinker', in *A Short History of Decay* (London: Penguin, 2010), p.99.

with it, to inhabit, canter, gallop at the same rhythm and pace? And how do we embrace a force without letting it run us into the ground?

The anxious personality. The *anxiety*.

The anxiety has certain realities: it sometimes takes me longer to do basic tasks, because a flood of details washes in at the sides and everything goes dark and I swim and then dead-float, paralysed, until I find something to grab onto, a way back to shore, one stroke at a time. I often over-identify, not just with people, but also with objects, images, ideas. *Poor sweet thing, so tender, so true.* I accidentally memorise things — lines from films, books, songs — and have them stuck in my head for days on end. I involuntarily clench my jaw, so I sleep with a mouth guard to keep from shredding my cheeks and chipping my teeth to bits. I sometimes think I will not live as long as other people who have far less healthy lifestyles, my adrenals always working in overdrive.

Courage, man; the hurt cannot be much.[128]

But the anxiety has its virtues, too, I must admit: I seem to have a hyper-vigilant mind that sustains a heightened sense of scrutiny, useful for memorising stories, down to the last detail. And this kind of memory perhaps facilitates abstract, metaphorical thinking — details link up across boundaries and disciplines, as my mind recalls a resemblance in form. I remember what people were wearing and of what they spoke the first time we met; how she wore her hair — how he gestured, inclined his head in a certain way. Some things you learn not to mention, of course (*stalker!*). And I no longer take personally when I feel I know a person intimately, who claims never to have met me.

And there are ways to counter many of anxiety's downsides. Strategies — *strategies* —are good. Hence the looking and the notes: the essay as roving anxiety.

Anxiety is altogether different from fear and similar concepts that refer to something definite…Anxiety is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility.[129]

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128 William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, III.1.95.

129 Søren Kierkegaard, 'The Concept of Anxiety', in *Kierkegaard's Writings VIII: Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. and trans. by Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p.42.

What I'm trying to say is that I'm not complaining. *Debbie Downer* — no — *Negative Nancy* — no, not I. I can look on the bright side of things, I *can*, I know I can.

There is a devil inside me.[130]

I have been talking to myself a lot. Arguing, sometimes. Or should I say with. Arguing with. Conversing with. Téte-à-téte, yes, I'm of two minds about — more than — a few things.

The conversations that happen during the daytime slip into the night and shadow around the corners. They begin to seem pale and wan, jaundiced and a little maleficent. Conversations, debates, arguments that seep out of certain parts of text and into others, without resolution. Texts I write, about me. Texts I read, about her. About Ana Mendieta.

They hold hands, link arms, form teams, draw lines. And before I know it, they are facing each other, opposed in opposition and yelling: 'Red Rover, Red Rover, we call EMILY over!' You know, I don't mind so much. Sometimes the oppositions helps, reminds me that there are no definitive answers, and so research and writing is an exploration. I don't have to strive for finitude. I don't have to pretend I think it exists. I can tell you, however, that I do not want to be the one — the body — running back and forth, lone figure across the field, endlessly bashing into fortified walls of humans, trying to break through their fleshy barricades. I cannot even tell which team is mine any longer — I cannot see, for all of the difference and the similarity that crowds the face of each member.

But I worry — is it the province of a coward alone to refuse to take sides, to choose?

We humiliate ourselves with binaries, ever the lingua franca of humanity. Conflict. Disagreement. I can't even agree with myself most days. Words humiliate us, the law humiliates us, explanation, theory — not these things in themselves, but our belief in, and our consequent embrace of, their infallibility.

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130 Ana Mendieta, *There is a Devil inside Me (Blood Sign #)*, 1974, Super-8 colour, silent film transferred to digital video disc, 4:40 minutes, The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection

The point is that these conversations are complicated. They are not binaries. They do not explicate one another — they are not tandem illustrations of the same thing. The terror and the tension, the tenderness and the tenacity involved in negotiating proximities is the best proof I have found, so far, to posit the relationships between things: juxtaposition, collage. The power, the danger, the wild success and failure of metaphor and the sensitive implications navigated in its practise.

Sometimes I hear a voice that tells me what I think is trivial, and I wonder if you need to be older than I am to write really meaningful essays. As though it's not even possible for me to have lived long enough to possess the kind of reflective abilities necessary to produce the quality of ruminations you ought to bother asking other people to read. Like my reflection is obvious, shiny and glaring — brash in the lights, head on full speed, so close in time to the collision. But maybe it's not about the distance that time and aging affords. Maybe it's that we never feel we are far enough away from something to understand what it really means. What it meant.

So how long do you wait for the afterglow, the afterburn, the afterimage to emerge? To see the shadows beyond the point of light — silver-mirrored, different exposures of grey — shades infinitely deep and capable of holding such detail, as the dark so often is.
It's not that what I sit down to write *feels* trivial. Just, as soon as I put it in words, it starts to seem a little — less. And I don't mean in the way that everything loses a fraction of itself, moving from Life to Paper. I mean it feels less in import. In resonance. What if nothing *ever* seems important? What a ridiculous question. And you see, I really *am* complaining now. Because writing isn't a transcription: you have to make it count — make it mean — make it feel and breathe and bleed — make it burn — make it freeze — make it —

I'm trying.

(Emily, sometimes you're so *trying*, he says. Like I don't already know.)

I have piles and piles of paper, note books filled with scraps, bits and pieces of stories, observations. I go through them every once in a while, looking for things to use,

moments that contain seeds for expansion or embellishment. I have an elaborate method that involves post-it flags and different coloured pens for adding notes (to distinguish the writing temporally, and also to indicate what 'category' it might belong to):
'good' –
'use later' –
'BORING' –
'bad prose' –
'maybe' –
'maybe' –
'not sure' –
'maybe' –
'sounds crazy' –
'fix; clean up' –
'goes with X, Y, Z' –
'cf. memory of A, B, C' –
'who did this happen to?' –

Statistically, it would be impossible for all of these things to be interesting or worth writing about in a way that purports some kind of external significance. And thank God for that.

Maybe life really *isn't* so meaningful, and the truth is that we need descriptive strategies, narrative structures, linguistic games —*framing devices* — to make it so. Maybe every act of writing, regardless of genre or discipline is an act of story telling. In the sense that stories, with their aims and bents, tell us what is most important. And with some effort, not to mention editing, all of the other crap falls away — the bogged down narrative details, the unrealistic characters, the impoverished, over-scripted dialogue.

Or maybe you decide to leave some of this in anyways, to remind everyone that you *know* it's just a story — a piece of writing — not real. Not entirely, at least.

I'm not sure what I believe. Would that be some sort of philosophy about the fundamental anti-realist nature of writing? Dress it up, dress it down, but for God's sake man, don't just leave it standing there *naked*. In (other) words, the impossibility of nudity

at all? *Real* nudity being something just *beneath* the skin – *flayed earth/flayed self (skin/sink).*[131]

Answers to these kinds of questions are at best tentative, indefinite, and — as such — divisive. Implying binaries, either/ors, that are not particularly useful unless you are trying to write something that has a stake in rules and stable values.

I mistrust all systematizers and avoid them. The will to system is a lack of integrity.[132]

What does it matter, in the end, if our behaviour, our practises remain the same regardless of surrounding conjectures? We make things, we take things, we break things — we order, we border, we hope, and we hazard.

He who knows does not speak; he who speaks does not know.[133]

The ancients knew a thing or two about aphorisms. Just a moment could be enough.

Wait.

Moment. Moment. Moment.

But see — already — I tried to start stringing them together.

Rapture of the deep.

I have a friend who is a deep-sea welder. It is one of the best paid jobs in the world. Because it is also one of the most dangerous. You weld things, in the dark, underwater, at the bottom of the ocean. Just going down there and then back up is dangerous enough. Never mind the work itself — welding in the cold, in the pitch black, while machines blindly move around equipment that could crush you as you float and glide with your torch, trying not to get caught in the fray.

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131 Nauman, Bruce, *Flayed Earth/Flayed Self (Skin/Sink*), (Los Angeles: Nicholas Wilder Gallery, 1974)

132 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.61.

133 Lao Tzu, 'Chapter 56', in Zhongshu Qian and Ronald Egan, *Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1998), p.297.

I asked him once, what it was that kept him going back. Besides the money, I said.

He said, when I'm down there, I can't think about anything else. I mean, I *really* can't. Or I'll die.

I said, so you have no choice but to exist only, precisely in that moment. Your life hangs in the balance.

He said, yeah, something like that.

I remember feeling deeply, rapturously — envious.

Chiasmus.

'Never let a fool kiss you, or a kiss fool you', I said, after the wedding was over and we stood outside sharing a cigarette, hiding under the overhang of the side porch so no one would see.

He looked at me, and the look caught midstream in his eyes. He thought I didn't notice. But I notice everything. I wanted to yell, but didn't: 'we are having a conversation about *writing*, this has nothing to do with you, this statement — *nothing* — not everything I say is to you, for you, secretly about *you*, and why do you want it to be?'

For it to be worth saying something, though, someone actually has to be listening. And besides, you must allow people their misunderstandings. Because if not now, then later they will find something else to hang the same cloak on. Shabby old garment.

But who am I kidding — most conversations carry a subtext — *sotto voce* — even if the parties involved might not be able to agree on exactly what it is whispering.

It really *wasn't* out of context: we were talking about poetry.

'You know', I said, 'I have always been fond of chiasmus: the cross, reversals, inverted parallelism.'

The long, deep fingernail gouge of a lake ran across the distance behind him. We were on the east side of Seneca Lake. From the ends — north and south — the lake is long enough that you can't see where it ends. That it ends at all. You could convince yourself that you were at the edge of something big, vast, monumental. But from where we stand now, the opposite shore is in plain view. There is no mistaking its edges and borders. All week I have been surprised at the slenderness of the lake. It seems sad to me, how it runs long and thin, hope full of currents and distance — only to be truncated, cut short, stopped shy at either end. Like a river cuckolded. Legends of the area describe some of the lakes as angry, full of turmoil, echoing the sound of distant war drums. I am sympathetic. I would be angry too. At being miscast, misunderstood.

Life is full of accidents, moments of meaning that breed augury in passing. In a sense, at its most basic conceptual level, this is what fuels poetry. A moment, *the* moment, and everything it contains; how an instant extends out of itself to reach, stretch, catch other webs. Poetry reveals how the moment writhes and shivers, shines and sighs, flayed, pinned down on the dissection table as it is. Scrutiny reveals the thin skin of the heart, *that cone-shaped muscular organ that maintains* ***circulation of the blood***.[134] Slivers and slithers. We let it stay there, beating and exposed for a moment longer than we should. Just so that we can look. Just so that we can say, if only to ourselves — I was there; I saw that. I saw it.

I wish I had made clear, in that eye-catching moment, that it was about the poetry, and not him. It was always about — it is only ever about — the poetry, the moment. I would give my eye teeth for chiasmus — antimetabole — synchysis — antanaclasis —

All of the ways to repeat something into a different meaning, sweet syntactical alchemies. I would give many things if it meant that I would understand, a little more deeply, the nature of words. Why we love repetition and rhythm and rhyme. And many other things.

He exhales a thin line of smoke. 'You never told me that story from your speech, the one about the ball of mating frogs rolling through the garden, and you thought it was a person.' He says it pointedly, like an accusation. 'I mean, considering that other Christmas you had, it's kind of an amazing story — the whole thing could be a book, Em — it could be like a really big book.'

'I know', I say. 'I've been writing bits and pieces of it for ages. I just can't see the whole logic yet. There are other stories too, that fit in at the sides, resonate with a kind of thematic affinity — happy accidents. Like the first time we went to Turks & Caicos, we went scuba diving and there was one guy who had joined the team recently, and he was obviously kind of the loser, like the one they all picked on. Kevin. He was a little chubby, and red-haired — not a constitution well-suited to the relentlessness of the sun out on the open water. So not only did they make fun of him all the time, but he also just naturally looked like he was always blushing, over his entire body. Once, he and I stayed out late on a dive together — it was getting cold, so everyone else had gone in.

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134 Barthelme, p.104

Swimming back to the boat from the reef, he talked to me about breathing. About how you need to count your breaths — coming up, going down — so you don't get the bends. The bends — what a phrase. I remember thinking about it as I sat on the boat: the sad, blushing poetry of everything he had said about air, how the lungs expand and contract. The blood of the body as it flows through the veins. How bubbles of air can enter it and kill you once they get to your heart. We got back to the boat and headed for land, but a storm had come up — the wind was really heavy, and the waves were getting bigger and bigger, white-caps. The boat was pitching and heaving around, and the captain looked worried. It was my fault that we had stayed out so long — I had been following a school of fish, trying to place myself right in the middle of it: I had an idea that it would feel like being suspended in a cloud of glittering coins. But everyone blamed Kevin; they kept ribbing him about it. I opened my mouth to say something, to defend him, but he caught my eye and shook his head, no, like it's OK, I will take the blame. Not in a weird martyred or chivalric way, just totally calm and at ease — like this is my place, and we are friends. Like taking deep breaths, in and out — natural, inevitable. Later, the evening turned even stormier, and I remember looking at the trees outside of my window as they waved around like crazy. There was an unfinished house across the road from where we were staying — its bare bones erected, but nothing else. When the sun set each night across the low fields of green shrub, if you aligned your vision in just the right way, it shone right through one of the windows, back to front, like a single glinting eye. The house was surrounded by dead trees — thin, bleached arms snaking towards the sky. And the bare branches reminded me of lung capillaries, you know? Like they were reaching up, straining for breath. It was beautiful, but I always felt like something was hiding in those bushes — such dense, green tangles.'

I am about to go on — I am thinking *this* is good, I am explaining something real, I am being heard, it all makes sense to someone other than me — when he nods cursorily and cuts me off, 'well, but you should write the book though.'

He says it like a command, or like he's giving me permission. Like he is my teacher and I'm his little girl pupil, and it's a valuable homework assignment to teach me something I never would have come up with on my own. Or maybe he says it like that's what will make the story real, make it *expand* and *contract*, come to life — rise out of itself to become something else, something greater. Maybe he's right.

But I keep wondering what he didn't hear about what I just told him. That I am working on it. I don't understand what it is that he's telling me I should do, nor why there is an angry and scornful cadence to his tone.

I keep thinking that I'm seeing everything from outside of me, and I have to remind myself that this isn't an abstract storyline, this is actually happening — this is a part of my life, one that I should probably participate in.

He's telling me a story about his cousin in Italy who thought that one night some people had broken into the garden and were eating all of the figs from the trees, gorging themselves, making a mess, and then it turned out it was actually just a bunch of pigs standing on their hind legs.

'That', I say, 'is gross', not able to indulge the story, because his coldness has reached out to fill the distance between us, brushing against my skin to give me goose bumps — my body temperature is dropping, fast, and with it, my tolerance for bullshit. But also because the story has conjured in my mind the image of a pig with his face and a thin, tiny moustache, slick with fig juice.

'I liked that e.e. cummings poem you read. Actually, you know, it's the only one of his that I like', he says, grinning unconvincingly, in some manner of misplaced conciliatory endorsement.

Does it mean something very bad when poets lie about poetry? But no — no form, nor its practitioners, is exempt from ordinary human deceits, conceits —

'Well', I say, 'to be perfectly honest, I'm not so fond of cummings — he always feels a bit one-trick to me. But they are pretty things, his poems — charming and fanciful and sweet and, moreover, happy — joyful. And it was for them — for my sister and her husband — not for me. If it had been for me, I would have read, I don't know, Prufrock.'

I hear myself laugh, and it sounds bitter and brittle — *because it is bitter, and because it is my heart*[135] — and it hurts my ears; it hurts everything.

He looks at me. I look at him. We look at each other. The lake looks at both of us. The trees breathe, and from inside the room upstairs, Johnny Cash sings about how he walks the line.

I change the subject. 'Did you see the fun fair? There are going to be fireworks later.'

'How do you know?', he scoffs.

'I saw a sign', I say.

I am always seeing signs.

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135 Stephen Crane, 'In the Desert', in *The Complete Poems of Stephen Crane* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), p.3.

Interval.

I go to see *Scenes from a Marriage*, adapted for the stage from the Bergman film of the same name. It is a good production, generally speaking, though perhaps too long, and the dialogue is sometimes ham-fisted and stilted. The story itself seems in places a little too 1970s and a little too Scandinavian for the audience. Everyone is a touch uncomfortable with all of the drinking and the yelling: they flinch, they gasp and recoil at the violence. Hands fly to faces, cover mouths, shield eyes. The male lead reminds me of a man I used to babysit for.

The play is rich with fodder. During the interval, audience members speak amongst themselves feverishly: the room pulses with conversation, heated discussion, arguments about who is in the right and who is in the wrong. Everyone wants to weigh in. People spill anecdotes left right and centre, share intimate details of their own lives, of things that have happened to other people they know, things that I assume have been told to them in confidence. Something about the immediate context has dissolved all sense of privacy or secrecy — not only the stories relayed, but that these delicate missives are also being aired in a room full of strangers. People agree, disagree, scorn romance, endorse true love, proclaim the virtues of marriage, separation, affairs, divorce, etc. In the bathroom, a woman leans against the counter and weeps, silently.

Out in the lounge, a large group of American students provide comic relief with the glib, self-assured commentary of youth:

'Oh my GOD, I can't believe she asked him if he wanted her to pick up his *dry-cleaning*. Like, sister, are you kidding me? He just told you he's leaving you for like some young BIMBO.'

'I know — like — GIRL — you are better of with*out* him, right?'

'It's like my mom always says, you know? Excuses, excuses!'

'She should go get *herself* a boyfriend! Some guy who is super *fine*!'

'Yeah — and a makeover! She should totes get a makeover.'

'I know they have a kid, but don't you think — isn't it true — that it's better to be divorced with a kid than to raise them in like a *dysfunctional* household?'

'He's gross anyways! He totally gives me the creeps. He looks like this guy I used to babysit for — Mr. Griplas. *He* was divorced, and once, when I was over at his place, I looked through the freezer and it was like full of TV *dinners* and stuff.'

'Oooh – *DEPRESSING*.'

'I know, right?'

'This play is dumb.'

Their teacher surveys them gently, smiling — interjecting only to ask thoughtful questions, urging them to think more deeply about the play. 'Relationships are very complicated', he says, 'and difficult. No matter who you think is right or wrong, you must try to understand all perspectives involved. This is what will make you a good writer. This is what will make you a good person.'

No, he doesn't say this last part. I just think it, I just hope it to myself to be true. Though what a good writer is, never mind a good person — well —

I want to say, 'Mark well, my children, *nota bene*, mes enfants, this is not the last time you will see these people.'

During the second half of the play, the onstage couple fight some more, beat the shit out of each other, get married to other people, cheat on their new partners *with* each other, then get back together. Predictable, if dated in its nuances.

I decide I will walk home from the theatre, though it will take over an hour. I like long walks, fast lengthy strides: the movement allows things to loose, to rise to the surface, to settle into place.

I think of a walk I once took in New York City, all the way from Harlem, down through Manhattan, and across the bridge into Cobble Hill, Brooklyn — just over three hours. It had started innocently enough, just a stroll, really. But in that city you can go for miles on a vertical or a horizontal — long lengths stretching endlessly ahead of you, and at street corners, when you turn your head to either side, you can see space, you can see water shining in the distance. The geometry is intoxicating. So why not? Why not keep going — go like this — in straight lines — and keep going and going.

Somewhere along the way, around Chelsea, as the sun lowered and a chill set into my bones and my knees started to feel a little shaky, I decided that I wanted to visit a psychic. I had passed window after window with glowing hands, tarot cards, magic balls flashing neon — PSYCHIC READINGS! SEE THE TRUTH! KNOW THE TRUTH! — hesitating each time, pausing to contemplate the possibility: *know the truth*.

So why not? Why not stop at the next one, turn off the sidewalk and up a narrow set of stairs and keep going through the heavy front door and then another and into the waiting room that smells of cat piss and patchouli. Why not — go like this — turn over the cards and watch closely as the psychic examines them but says nothing. Go like this — extend your hands across the table when she asks, allow her to hold them in hers and turn them over and back and over and back again as her brow furrows and her mouth draws a tense, straight line. Listen carefully as she tells you that in this life you will have to make choices and that it will not be easy, it will be very difficult, it will be painful.

You — she says — you will have to choose between your intellectual and your domestic life. You may not have both.

I — you say — I feel like you're just reminding me that I'm a woman.

She laughs and her eyes crinkle at the corners but are hard as glass and serious and she does not break contact. She holds your hands tightly and says listen to what I am saying, this is important information: you have something real to give, and people will try to take it from you, to make you less.

Nod and mumble, I know I know. Feel her fingernails digging into your palms.

Love — she says — no, love is not for you. Because you understand the madness of its foolish, grasping promises, love will make you dangerous and unhinged. It will steal from you the things you need to survive. You — she says — you need to be alone. Your talent, your calling, is for something else.

Ask her what she means.

Write — she says. I see the callus here on your finger. You are a writer, right? You will write. It might not be any good in the end, but MY, will you write.

Write — you say. Right — Rite. Love — you say — *ceci n'est pas un pipe.*

If — she says — you are afraid of the person you want to be, then you will never be the writer you want to be.

Back out on the streets, continuing my long longing sojourn home, I thought about what the psychic said. I thought about bargaining — a little writing for a little love — here and there — and surely it didn't need to be one or the other — because other people seem to be able to find a balance — and maybe it's just a useful conceit, the convenience of horizons, verticals and horizontals — faced, opposing, buttressed.

But it all made sense to me, in a way.

In the cool in the dusk in the city, with its incisive purviews, I looked around at the lights and breathed deeply the air that smelt of ancient dirt and garbage and perfume. I felt that I had been given a kind of permission. I felt as though the world was turning itself towards me, shy and expectant, lifting its garments to reveal just a glimpse of blue flashing night thighs, soft and full of promise. I could see all of the silken, tender, hidden things around me and my eyes and my cheeks blushed and burned. It dazzled and consoled, the idea that happiness for me was not the same as it was for other people. Even if it was partly just an excuse to never have to feel certain things.

Walking now, in this other big city, having left the theatricality of the evening behind, I think about how I choose — every time someone says *I love you* — I choose words over meaning. *Ceci n'est pas* —

This is not, in fact, a regular occurrence, and so it is possible to count any loss as insignificant, in the grand scheme of things. I have tallied carefully to ensure. I have calculated the margin for error.

But the thing is, the *nice* thing — is that if I had to choose, it meant — at least — that Love was a choice, which meant it was real — a Real Thing, out there in the world. And so someone *else* could have it. And someone else could have mine, too — my share that I wouldn't, that I couldn't use. Yes, I could be a donor. Because, like our words, we can give our organs to other people. They can live off of them. They can live full lives.

And if no one else needed it, then maybe, just maybe, it would still be there if I was able to come back for it someday.

But it is you I want now, here in the middle of this Uprising, with the streets yellow and threatening short, ugly lances with fur at the throat and inexplicable shell money lying in the grass. It is when I am with you that I am happiest, and it is for you that I am making this hollow-core door table with black wrought iron legs. I held Sylvia by her bear-claw necklace. 'Call off your braves', I said. 'We have many years left to live.'[136]

Blind man's bluff.

Later, I am struck only by the triviality of it. The things that resonate are just a few lines here and there that speak of something other than the sad smallness of the room in which we find ourselves, filled with excuses and banalities and lazy fears.

Later. After. *How late it was, how late.*

After the dinner, the wine, the dancing, the bourbon, the dancing, the whisky, the sitting, and then the dancing again. After the rain starts, but we stand outside anyways because there are fireworks going off in the distance. After he won't speak to me or look me in the eye, but I keep hearing him tell guest after guest that we're best friends; that we have been, *forever*. After I get bored and sneak downstairs into the tent outside, now dark and quiet, and take my shoes off to push my feet through the long wet grass. After we are about to take the hired bus back to the hotel when someone says to me, hey, hey there's something stuck to the bottom of your shoe, and I look and it's one of the coloured circles of paper that you were supposed to write messages on, and I see it's to my sister and it says 'Congratulations! This is the first day of your life!' After I guess, precisely, the number of jelly beans in the jar and when he asks me how I did it I say, *I know things*, and he blanches and stares at me.

After he says, *I just* – and I say – *I know, I knew, I have always known. Forever.*

The bus is a yellow school bus, narrow rows, and our knees press at awkward angles into the seats in front of us. We drive through the towns. Ovid. Scipio. Burdett. Naples. Lodi. Dundee. Dresden. Romulus. Genoa. Alpine. Erin. Alpsburg. The whole world in a straight line, with the lake, the cuckolded river, running alongside us the entire way.

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136 Barthelme, p.104

'What are you thinking?', he says. Fishing for something — who knows. Does he want me to cry or pound on his chest, throw a fit of some sort? Maybe I should tear off my fake eyelashes and go hysterical. Oh — I'm not wearing any. Or maybe he's sad, maybe he just wants company, human connection. Maybe we all do; but maybe sometimes, all of a sudden and without warning, it's just *too* late.

'I was thinking of that line from Alice Munro, at the end of *Lives of Girls and Women*. Del is trying to write her book, and she is remembering Jubilee — she writes, "People's lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable – deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum."[137] It's all I've been able to think about this week, doing this drive back and forth, up and down the lake. These tiny towns give me the creeps, but I like to think of their deep linoleum caves. How many stories we are flashing by here, with every second.'

He looks at me, stunned. I look at him. Had it been an inappropriate thing to say at this juncture?

After I am stopped outside of the hotel by other guests from the wedding who say I have a good voice for radio. After he looks angry, but somehow also proprietary when they say this. After I remember why I promised myself never to get involved with another writer. After I throw my bouquet in the garbage outside the hotel and he fishes it out, 'but you'll want to keep this!'. After I wonder, again, at what point did this mask slip down over my face, at what point did I become this person to him, this person who is not me. After I notice that there is a faint blue stain on both of my hands. Blue is rare in flowers, so my bunch had been dyed artificially. Each bride got to choose her own colour scheme: I picked blue. I was blue.

After I'm still waiting to ask: What do you want? Why are you here?

It's funny, what seems to remain. When a story happens you think certain details are significant — usually occurrences, narrative elements, the *facts*. But these ultimately fade to leave something else behind.

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137 Alice Munro, 'Epilogue: The Photographer', in *Lives of Girls and Women* (Toronto: Penguin, 1997), p.270.

To say the Real Story seems too simple. It is rather more, rather less. It is contained within the tiniest things, that which might otherwise seem mundane. It all falls away until hardly anything is left, leaving the bare bones, the skeleton picked clean and you think OH, oh — OH, you think, that is the real form of the beast, whatever animal it was. That is where its heart beat. That is where it thought. That is where it breathed. There is its hunger, some of which remains. See it hovering in the air above?

Because it is bitter,
And because it is my heart.

Words, like moments, are what endure the longest. Words, to which no coherence can be applied, no language strong enough to string their haphazard dissembling beauty into a straight line. We speak of gestures, actions, thoughts. But no one speaks in complete sentences. Not really. By convention, there are rules to follow, but it is best not to mistake them for order. We put sentences together spatially and temporally, but what we *mean* has no temporal or spatial element. Not in the way it comes together on the page, at least. This follows this follows that follows this.

Is there something paralyzingly holy in the vicious nature of the word that is not found in the elements of the other arts?[138]

Language reaches out, it unfurls in hot, wet tendrils. We needle, we lace, we knit, we purl — we thread ourselves together and apart, binding our hands with sinew and hair, and then wonder at our reduced mobility. We have a full house, a royal flush, but it remains forever held close to the chest, clutched fast to the heart.

The night before, as we sat at the edge of the lake talking, I had thought of geology. I thought of being alone, wishing I was. The moon rose red then orange then yellow then white above us. Huge then large then medium then small, until it found its accustomed place — its pearly white pinhead settling into the night sky.

O, swear not by the moon, th'inconstant moon.
That monthly changes in her circled orb.[139]

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138 Samuel Beckett, 'German Letter of 1937' [to Axel Kahn], in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and Fragments* (London: John Calder, 1983; 2001), p.172.

139 Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, II.2.109-110.

'You know that poem', he had said.

'No, which one?'

'The one about driving in Scarborough and parking, it's called 'Scarborough Bluffs'.'

I hadn't known he had a poem called that; the coincidence strikes me speechless. He doesn't know that I'm writing about the Bluffs. Addled with superstition, I have mentioned it to no one.

'Oh', I said. 'I didn't know you wrote a poem called that.'

'You did, you do know it – you *know* it, Em.'

I could hear a querulous wire of hurt twisting through his voice.

'Em, I sent it to you to read.'

'Yes, yes — oh of course — sorry, I forgot the title', I had said, trying to recover whatever it was that had been lost in that moment. Maybe it was *I* who didn't listen, who didn't ask, who didn't pay attention. *Please Pay Attention Please.*[140] Maybe I could only hear what was important to me, and I thought it sounded the same as what was important to other people.

What is that game?
Blind man's bluff?

But *someone* has to tie the blindfold.

After hours of drinking more and fighting more and talking more — and yelling and sitting in silence staring at each other staring at the ground staring out the window. After

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140 Bruce Nauman, *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words*, ed. by Janet Kraynak (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003)

it is all over, the questions, the answers, the lies, the truths, the accusations, the apathy — I do my best to avoid the clichés.

- I don't understand what changed all of a sudden
- But I told you
- But you said
- And you
- And I
- And we
- I don't want
- We can still
- Don't
- Please
- It's OK
- Just —

etc.

etc.

etc.

I know I wouldn't even mean any of them, not really at all, but it is difficult, because all of the other words seemed to have disappeared. The ones that would explain that things *do* change, in complicated, wordless ways. That people make mistakes — on purpose, by accident — hurt and lose each other — don't notice can't stop it happening won't admit until long after it's all over and then what does it matter anyways. That we say and tell things that we thought we meant but maybe we don't mean or maybe *maybe* just maybe we only wanted to hear what they would sound like. That this is actually a version of being friends, of being a person, a human being, and it really *is* OK, if you can bear it, if you can stick it out afterwards — wait for things to expand and contract — give them space to breathe.

After — after all that follows is a silence that last and lasts and has lasted, I think that it is something of a disappointment to find that ordinary hurts, predictable betrayals, are no less painful.

After — through it all, I can still see that even the corroded metal heart continues to beat, will make the engine run. I can see that even the smallest, most unsurprising and pathetic stories are particular, as well as abstract — that anything, given the right care, has the ability to speak beyond itself.

Here, I had seen unfold a kind of tale about unrequited longing and the disappointments it can cause us to visit upon ourselves when we refuse to acknowledge its origins. I knew that it meant the end of a friendship, but in a way it was also the beginning of a different kind of understanding. The two aren't comparable — losses and gains never are — but I felt grateful, in a way, for the entropic reminder. And I felt coldly obligated by my intellectual fascination at the fact to stay for as long as possible and watch, detached, mine and someone else's foibles and pains and disillusions unfold, futilely directed this way and that. Call it a kind of masochism, maybe sociopathy, call it a sense of *duty*, but I thought — these are human beings — and this is beautiful. What else could it be.

What is beautiful is seized.

I kept one flower from the bouquet.

In the morning, after he is gone, after I have packed my bags, I leave the flower on the desk in a glass of water. Lined up neatly with the side of the telephone.

At the car, my parents say, 'what happened? We thought you two were driving to Toronto and that you were going to stay for a few days?'

I shrug, having almost already forgotten the real reason overnight as I slept and it seeped and sank out of me, drenching the mattress beneath with a blue stain of inevitability, full of the rueful understanding of people. And full of loss. Because it was one. It was a great loss.

'We changed our minds', I say, 'that's all.'

Who is we?

Swan song.

Towards the end of the summer, I visit my best friend's family cottage, where we have been going together for years.

Talk about ghosts.

At the opposite end of the lake, there was once a Catholic all boys' camp, run by priests. One evening, a group of boats was caught out on the lake in a storm. 5 or 6 canoes, all of them overturned and each member drowned. Legend has it that around the lake you can hear them at night, crying for help, followed by an abrupt and chilling silence. People have seen lights moving out on the water that suddenly extinguish when they get to a particular location. The same place, every time: near to where the lake was dredged all those years ago to uncover the two dozen water-logged bodies, to drag them up from their watery graves.

I've never heard anything unusual sounding, though it would be easy to mistake the cry of a loon.

On clear, calm days, we drive the small tin motorboat to where there is a large cliff, The Jumping Rock — a stony high dive perch, about 4 or 5 metres above the water. We take turns scrambling up a narrow path at the edge of the rock, grabbing onto trees for support, their piny branches scratching our exposed skin with long red lines unnoticed until later, eager as we are to reach the top — to jump, to take the plunge.

Everyone wears a lifejacket, but not me — not I.

Everyone jumps, but not me — not I.

I dive. Relishing the fact that my swimsuit is the only thing between me and the air, and then the water. I am practiced, of course, from my days on the high board at the pool. I am unafraid as I slice through the air, and then the water. I am always surprised at my relative fearlessness, as I am generally an anxious person. Maybe it feels rehearsed; I have done it so many times. Or maybe it is the extremity of it. So high up. It must be worth it.

Or maybe it is the cut, the slice — an insistence that we do move through these invisible things, we *do*.

For a proper swan dive, you jump out forwards, straight, forming as close to a horizontal as possible with your body, your arms out to the sides, stretched back like wings, chest open, ribcage expanding. Then, at the crucial moment, you bring your hands together in a point over your head and angle them downwards. Your upper body naturally curls forward to follow your hands, and then your legs straighten up behind so that you are in a line, an arrow plunging down into the water. It is pure physics and geometry — executed perfectly, a beautiful proof. When you are in the early phase of the dive — the outstretched horizontal — you look forward and up, baring your throat to the water below. You do not look down. *Never down*. This is important.

Mechanically, because angling your head down will cause your body to curl forward too early, leading you to over-extend and end up half-somersaulting into a back flop.

Psychologically, because looking down and finding yourself 4 metres up, on an even plane to the water, is terrifying. You imagine yourself suspended in the air, then crashing straight down smack down, like in a cartoon — your body hitting the water flat and shattering like glass, scattering into disparate limbs and parts.

No. You keep your head up — you know the correct form. If you follow it, all will be well.

And so this is my mistake.

One afternoon when we are at the rock, the sky suddenly turns grey — the wind rises and clouds blow in, low, sombre, threatening — black-bellied rumblings.

We are getting ready to leave when I say — one more one more wait a second, I just want to do one more! The others wait in the boat as I climb up the hill again, to the top of the rock. One last time. They look up at me from below, where the boat rocks gently in the waves. I always do things like this. One more, one final look, one last jump — as

though events need a deliberate end, a concluding action to tie things up, to close the scene.

Which makes sense, in a way. But — well — it's an awful lot of pressure, isn't it?

I prepare to dive, curling my toes down to grip the edge of the rock. I lift up onto the balls of my feet, steady myself — arms forward, together — arms straight out to the sides, apart. I swing them behind me in an arc and propel myself off of the cliff and into the air. I face forward and up, white throat extended, looking to the skies.

It's not pathetic fallacy, per se, but something about the heavy clouds above reminds me of the drowned Catholic boys and their priestly guides. For a truly terrible moment — though I know they capsized nowhere near here — I picture the water below me clogged with bodies. I imagine them to be, impractically, wearing choir vestments that are heavy with water, sheaves of rich, heavy cloth dragging them down — purple, white, red, gold. I picture their arms reaching up to the surface that I am about to crash through.

I look down.

I look down. I curve down too early. I feel the gravity taking hold, tilting me too far in the wrong direction. Somehow I manage to correct my body enough to enter the water relatively straight. But the top of my right foot smacks the surface at a strange angle, so hard that it feels like kicking a giant slab of rock. I close my eyes underwater and wince, swimming gingerly up to the surface for air.

You fool — I think — there is nothing down here in the water.

When I surface, the others in the boat are clapping. That was the best one yet! For a moment I think they are making fun of me, then realise they are serious. They did not notice that anything was off. OH — oh thanks, I say. I climb into the boat. My foot is killing me, but I don't mention it. I like the idea of the swan dive, the last one, that final moment up there on the rock alone, having been perfect. That it looked perfect from a distance seems good enough, in a way. When we get to shore, I try not to limp.

It takes about two weeks of pain for me to understand that I might have actually injured myself. I got to the doctor, and it turns out I have broken a small bone in my foot.

'But — I just hit it on some water', I say. 'That seems impossible.'

It's not, though.

Even water — fluid things, with enough height, speed, distance, force, and at just the right angle — can act like a solid. Can be hard enough to break bones. Like a piece of concrete, says the doctor, like a giant slab of rock.

Angels are important.

I mean angles. *Angles.*

Like I said, you don't look down when you're jumping from that high up.

But we know this already.

We'd rather have the iceberg than the ship,
although it meant the end of travel.[141]

Map of the Moon.

She sometimes feels that everything leaves, will leave. She goes to bed at night wondering if her memories will be gone in the morning, having furtively departed during sleep. Will she wake blank and new and terrified like a baby? Or perhaps it is a slow leaving — just one, two, three, small chunks at a time, so you don't notice until one day everything is gone, razed clean. It would be okay if it was all of them at once, she thinks. You wouldn't know what you were missing. The world would seem simply as it was. As it is.

She thinks that perhaps everything occurs to her in existential absolutes. She sees most things in life, most things propelled by desire, as a symptom of the eternal yearning of being human. The search for something that cannot be found. What they call longing: desire or love without object, without subject.

She looks at the man, a poet, who sits next to her, here in the dark by the lake, under a full moon.

Thinking he will understand, she tries to explain how she believes that freedom comes with the acceptance that there are no wholes, while somehow continuing to strive for them in the abstract — reaching for the beauty of the idea, all the while knowing we can only ever fall short. For, in the end, what object, what subject could ever approximate, let alone fill such a longing-sized hole? He nods in agreement, though something stops and startles in his eyes, like an animal. She wonders if the world is divided into two types of people, those who believe that the object, the subject exists, and those who do not.

Looking up at the sky, she says, 'something about the stars, about this place reminds me of Bertrand Russell, what he referred to as "the austere beauty of mathematics" — which is about the degree of delight in the manipulation of numbers and symbols. It's not so different from writing. From things like metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche. Drawing lines, equations, attempting proofs between disparate yet related things. It all hazards at a sense of universality, a fundamental similarity in difference, a union of the whole via the

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141 Elizabeth Bishop, 'The Imaginary Iceberg', in *North & South* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946), p.2.

interaction of correlated parts. Interpolation, extrapolation. Orbiting metaphors. Metonymical algorithms.'

He says, 'well that's how Aristotle came up with the triangle, isn't it? Looking at the stars? Take any three stars and you can draw a triangle. It seems obvious now, but imagine a world without the idea. Lines between only two points. In essence, the triangle was the beginning of dimensionality.'

She thinks yes, this is paramount. Dimensionality. Hold it in your hands like a prism, turn it round, feel its smooth faces, it edges, lean and sure. Triangulation — yes — see how it bends and throws the light. There is always that third, that outside point. What did it say over the door of Plato's Academy? *Let no one here enter who is ignorant of Geometry.*[142]

She thinks this — this is why she has learned never to count on anything solid. There is always that third, that outside point. She doesn't mind so much. The line always seemed fickle somehow, taking sides. And it's true that things have shape, size, area, weight. Things are full of properties, and those that remain unknown are those best heeded. Or perhaps admired. Yes, and praised.

Is this what is it about Symmetry that eludes our framing, that makes it so fearful?

She nods, grateful nonetheless that sometimes they agree.

Still looking up, she says, 'the thing about the moon is this, most of the time you see humans trying and failing, or falling just short. It makes life more interesting somehow, this ineptitude, this lack of finesse — saggy, baggy cracks. Doubt, failure, curiosity, and desire intertwine and compel us to press onward. But sometimes, every so often, it's like we trick ourselves into succeeding.' She pauses for a moment and goes on, trying to explain. 'I mean, we really go all the way. We really do it. The moon was like that — we really *went there*.'

'But then we had to come back', he says. He says, scornfully. 'All we did was walk around for a while, and then we came back.'

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142 Plato, as cited in Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay*, p.12.

'But don't you think — these— these kinds of things', she says, 'they undo us. These moments of acute being in which, ironically, everything *but* pure gravity is removed, and we are rendered weightless nonetheless.'

'The thing about the moon', he says, for the second time that evening, 'is that — like everything else in life — it gets uglier the longer you look at it.'

'It would have meant less', she says — 'it would have meant *less* if we had *stayed*. That was never the point.'

'You're awfully Romantic', he says, 'for a terribly unromantic person.'

She laughs, but notes a hint of anger and perhaps derision in the joke. She wishes she could say what she really thinks, which is that: we all want things we can't have. Things we can't have because *they don't exist*. It isn't Romantic or unromantic, it just *is*. What is it that Freud said?

The distinction between self and not self is made by the decision to claim all that the ego likes as 'mine' and to reject all that the ego dislikes as 'not mine'. Divided, we learn where our selves end and the world begins. Self-taught, we love what we can make our own and hate what remains other.[143]

He says, 'what happens to people like us? I really think that we could end up alone.'

She thinks it doesn't seem like a good enough reason to be together, instead. She doesn't say anything; she waits to see if he will elaborate. But he doesn't go on, taking her silence for assent. His loneliness stretches out across the dark lake in front of them, its arms and fingers reaching forward and then curling, furling back in upon themselves, clutching at her throat, their forearms leaning heavily against her esophagus.

Days earlier, they had placed a bet on the moon. She said waxing, he said waning. Now — with the incontrovertible evidence before them — he claims it had been the other way around. She feels glad that they had not named the terms of the bet, even knowing it didn't really matter — that either way, she expected to collect nothing. Because she

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143 Ibid., p.37

knows that, *in an explained universe, nothing would still have meaning except madness itself. A thing we have encompassed no longer counts.*[144]

'All of the things you write', he says, 'how do people know that they are true?'

She hears herself say, without thinking, 'they just do', which is just as ridiculous as — well — it sounds. Out loud, that is. Inside her head it still seems obvious — a neutral reality — *we hold these truths to be self-evident*. But something happens passing from diaphragm — esophagus — tongue — propelled by the lungs — breath pushing against the back of her teeth — through her open mouth to hang in the air just beyond — interior to exterior. Because, of course, no one *just does* anything. And how much more difficult it is to speak, after all, than we give ourselves credit for.

'One last thing', she says — 'I was reading a book and I found out that because of the way space curves, there are stars that everybody thinks of as twin stars, but they're really the same one.'

He says, 'I believe it.'

She say, 'I don't.'

He says, 'That — that is because you are the kind of person who would try to climb a ladder also using the spaces *between* the rungs.'

She can't figure out if he thinks he is giving her a compliment or an insult, and so she says nothing. Because, if it is true what Lacan says, then *language is the non-being of objects.*[145]

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144 E.M. Cioran, *The Fall Into Time* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), p.177.

145 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), p.263.

Marke well: If't be not as should be
Blame the bad cutter and not me.

Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*

The Bluffs #4.

You didn't think I found it in the end, did you?

When I look back, I can see all of the clues I left for myself along the way. It took me a long time to notice. Maybe you picked up on them before I did.

Embedded in my notes, Pleistocene fossils — strange, tentacled bodies reaching out, crawling for shore:

What remains is not a summation or condensation of the work, but a number of visual artefacts that feel initiatory, full of potential; they gesture to future resolutions or re-formations — an end is never seen.[146]

The disappearance of the work is a serious limitation to writing about it, yet that sense of loss is central to its meaning…They seem defiantly to tease us, preying on the limits of our vision, daring us to act on faith, forcing us to accept their disappearance.[147]

She negotiates among identity possibilities that themselves emerge with the act of performance. No one true identity exists prior to the act of performing. No one identity remains stable in and through performance.[148]

I wanted to send an image of smoke into the atmosphere.[149]

Leafing through my notes, these quotations crop up a number of times, though I suspect that upon each occasion of writing I believed I was finding them anew. We see what we want to; we seize what we already know and hold to it fast.

It is a thorny undertaking…to follow a movement so wandering as that of our mind, to penetrate its innermost folds, to pick out and immobilize the innumerable flutterings that agitate it.[150]

Or maybe you didn't notice either. Maybe you wanted, like I did, to know how it felt when I walked along the shore against the Bluffs, my feet in the water, the rocks slippery and cold, the dark falling and falling faster and darker. How I kept twisting my ankles because I couldn't see very well, and how I cursed myself for not thinking to bring a flashlight, and even more so for not catching the earlier train. How my right foot was

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146 Adrian Heathfield, 'Embers', in *Ana Mendieta: Traces*, p.24.

147 Blocker, p. 23.

148 Ibid., p. 25.

149 Ana Mendieta, transcription of slide lecture at Alfred University, 1981, as cited in Rosenthal, p.18.

150 Michel de Montaigne, 'Of Practice', in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, p.273.

aching, with its broken bone lodged somewhere amidst the tendons near the toes. How, at some points, the water was up to my knees, but at others, there were stretches of dry path, although it was covered in sharp rocks and broken shale so thin and flat it was impossible to walk on and I slid and lurched around like a drunken sailor on shore leave — on a short leash — a tight rope. How it couldn't have been that far, really — 20 metres, maybe 30 — but it felt like forever. How the whole time I ran my right hand along the rock, arm outstretched, feeling around for any significant grooves, variations in texture or surface. How I stopped often because rocks are naturally full of these. How after a while I couldn't tell the difference anymore, but I liked the rough feel of it dragging against the flat of my palm. Lonely as a finger.

How I was finally asked to leave the park, by a security guard who had been walking on the cliff above, sweeping the area, when he heard a noise below, shone his torch beam over the edge, and seen me below, standing in the water, holding onto the face of the rock — running my hands up and down it. How I yelled up at him, trying to reassure, that I was 'just looking for an art work – from 1982', but he obviously thought I was insane and offered to call my parents. Instead, I asked for a ride to the Guild Inn, and he looked at me like I was even more disturbed and told me that 'all it is now is a derelict old hotel, boarded up buildings, some of them torn up, some burned down – some *haunted* – lady, you don't want to go there.' So I asked him to drop me off at a diner down the street from the train station. Before I got out of the car, he said to me that he had thought, when he saw me at the bottom of the cliff, arms outstretched, that I was blind. That I was running my hands over the rocks like the blind touch people's faces to recognise them, to see if the visage is familiar. Like I was lost or had been washed up there and was looking for an opening, some way to get through the rock, trying to escape from the lake.

The word method comes from the Ancient Greek *méthodos*, which splits into two parts: *méta*, after, and *hodos*, way, motion, journey. Justus Buchler writes, 'Methodic groping is a kind of comradeship with chance — a conditional alliance…it is the price that the finite creature is naturally obliged to pay in the process of search.'[151] Maybe I didn't need to feel embarrassed at being caught, quite literally, groping in the dark.

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151 Justus Buchler, *The Concept of Method* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1961), p.84.

So I sat there in the diner drinking cups of burnt coffee, surprised to find that I had only 45 minutes to kill until my train. How long had I been at the Bluffs?

Under the bright lights of the diner, I looked at the images I had brought with me as aids – *aide-mémoire*. I clutched the pieces of paper in my hands. They were soft as felt in places where they had been folded and creased many times. Like a map covered in paths and meanders — all taken, it must be, they are so worn — crisscrossing the paper in creases and scars — so like skin. I looked carefully at the figure, the *Labyrinth of Venus*. Why do the body and the head appear to balloon out of it like that, I wondered, and then blushed — oh — remembering that I always forgot the most obvious and carnal interpretation. Oh, yes — oh — that's what desire looks like: it swells, increases in size.

I thought, what if the piece never existed at all? And briefly, my breath left my body, and the world tilted and shifted around me — the ground wheeled up at my face and it was all pebbles and rocks and stones bare and smooth and staring, eyes wide, right back at me. For such is the magnitude of symbols — the power with which we imbue them — the love object — the object of love — mine — yours — ours —

The idea of an absence so complete, so natural, and so genuine filled — for a moment — all of the holes in my awkward and bulleted heart.

I do not know what it is, having never seen anything like it before.[152]

Perhaps the search is only ever to remind us of the labyrinthine nature of the pursuit of understanding. There is a sense, in the not finding, that a certain time and place — a certain being and body — is distinct to itself. No amount of revisiting can recapture or recreate it. Each real visitation, in fact, divides it further from our remembrance of it in the present.

We know this because youth is like that. Love is like that, too.

As if, in the inevitable transformation embedded within the logic of the art work — the *Labyrinth* — was a life cycle of its own. It existed or had existed at some point in time,

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152 Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with George Duthuit* (London: John Calder, 1999), p.103.

and now continues to exist — extracted, perfected, re-enacted, again and again in the here then now, the now then here.

Now, here, it seemed obvious that the real task wasn't to find, but to describe the process. Mendieta's process. My process. Pilgrim's progress. And, equally, to allow the process to describe things to me — crucial points about language and narrative. As Pascal wrote, 'the same meaning changes with the words which express it. Meanings receive their dignity from words instead of giving it to them.'[153] If the purpose of the essay was to portray in language the actual process of the mind seeking truth, then the mind and the language alike must come under scrutiny, must find their correspondent form. If the mind was fanciful, indulgent, buoyed, weak, flourishing, florid, imaginative, ordinary — then so must be the language. My concern was not knowledge proper, but my exploration of the conventions by which experience might be expressed and contained. And with the essay, I could swerve and saunter and stray.

I think you are in love with more
than a story this is the story of
stories and what you have done with it[154]

I sat there thinking about how the summer was a summer of looking, which never meant that it would inherently be one of finding.

I tried to understand what it meant that I attempted to find the *Labyrinth*, that I had felt such an ardent need to see it in person. Why was I not content to have the work designated as Mendieta intended it thereafter, in image alone? What was this drive for the ultimate, the origin, even when we know on some level that it will yield nothing. My recent behaviour seemed erratic and desperate, even to my own mind. I wanted to blame someone or something – 'but mum, the essay *made* me do it!'. In fact, I wasn't even sure if I really thought any of these things at all, or if the essay really *had* made me think them.

Part of the search had to do with the idea of needing to participate in a kind of exchange, to earn something: the labyrinth, the sky, the lake, the earth woman's eye, her tears, and

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153 Blaise Pascal, 'No. 50', *Pensées*, in *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. by Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.142.

154 James Tate, 'Brother of the Unknown Ancient Man', in *Selected Poems* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), p. 70.

mine, and all of the emptied, fleshy places. It wasn't that I thought I owed something for the simple fact of life itself, but I wanted to *feel* worthy — or I at least wanted to know what it was *like* to feel worthy, even if it meant I would necessarily leave empty-handed.

As a child I had always been obsessed with the space between the window panes on trains or planes, where the air has been sealed. I used to lean against the window, press my profile flat against it to try to see what existed within that gap, thinking it couldn't just be *air*. I used to imagine a tiny person sitting in there, that was where she lived. She would have a tiny chair, maybe, and the best views: both the inside and the outside at the same time, and her always between — sandwiched and silent in that invisible space.

Sometimes, on the days that are full of stillness, I think this place is where I must be. It's like living in the guest room; it's like having a book out of the library — *forever*. It is being not quite *there* — always waiting for something to leave, to go, understanding that loss is inevitable — loss is primordial, loss is powerful, because it reminds us that a thing can have many incarnations.

Maybe there is a perverse pleasure in the unsatisfying nature of the space between performance and documentation, between the making of a thing and its ultimate existence.

But you must be ready to accept that when you get what you want, you are no longer wanting, and yet you still do. An end is never seen.

And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time[155]

Mendieta would often return to favourite work sites and recycle former siluetas to create new ones.[156] I think it is courageous — to return to the things we have made, to the places we think we know. To do so is to face the possibility of *un*making and *un*knowing: to see that memory and narrative are full of holes and fissures, silver-mirrored truths.

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155 T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), p.59.

156 Viso, Olga M., *Unseen Mendieta: the unpublished works of Ana Mendieta* (Munich; London: Prestel, 2008), p. 53.

Heraclitus said, 'you could not step twice into the same river; for other waters are ever flowing onto you'?[157] In absence of any anxiety about permanence or the stability of meaning, it seems a liberating notion. *Never to be yourself and yet always.* The I, the eye, in flux. And so to visit, to revisit, to remember, is fundamentally generous in spirit. Add something new; take nothing away.

What do we want?

Who is we?

You know, us.

What, you and me?

No – (broad circular gesture): us. *Us.*

What did *I* want.

To add something new? To take nothing away? To just try, to keep trying, attempting, essaying, without end? What does a life like that resemble?

Privilege, I think. It resembles the privilege of human, of being alive. Of being — ever being — a mind, in the marvels and miseries of its makings.

What, and how much, do we want, indeed.

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157 Heraclitus, 'Fragment 91', in *Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments*, ed. and trans. by G.S. Kirk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), p.381.

LE CORBUSIER + IANNIS XENAKIS,
LE COUVENT SAINT-MAIRE DE LA TOURETTE, **1959**

Recently I retired to my estates, determined to devote myself as far as I could to spending what little life I have left quietly and privately; it seemed to me then that the greatest favour I could do for my mind was to leave it in total idleness, caring for itself, concerned only with itself, calmly thinking of itself. I hoped it could do that more easily from then on, since with the passage of time it had grown more mature and put on weight.
But I find —

Varium sempter dant otia mentis

(Idleness always produces fickle changes of mind)

— that on the contrary it bolted off like a runaway horse, taking far more trouble over itself than it ever did over anyone else; it gave birth to so many chimeras and fantastic monstrosities, one after another, without order or fitness, that, so as to contemplate at my ease their oddness and their strangeness, I began to keep a record of them, hoping in time to make my mind ashamed of itself.

Michel de Montaigne, 'Of Idleness', *Essais*

L'Architecte.

Here's what happens.

You plan a trip. You book your train and your plane and your train tickets. You go to France, northwest of Lyon, to visit a building: Le Couvent Sainte Marie de la Tourette.

You go alone, you tell few: you are on a mission. It is a mission — it is a calling — to understand, to unearth something about place — site, building, architecture. About excavation and digging deep. More than anything, it is about structure. How we put things together.

You arrive and you settle in, you settle down for the stay. Looking carefully, documenting, taking notes.

In your room is a desk and in the desk is a drawer and in the drawer is a book.
L'Architecte, it is called, by someone named Robert Auzelle.

It is dedicated — *à ma femme.* To my woman. You think that in French, it somehow loses the proprietary tone and sounds — tender.

The epigraph is from chapter 11 of the *Tao Te Ching*, by Lao Tzu:
Clay is used to make vases
But it's the internal void
Upon which their usefulness depends.

Every room is pierced by windows and doors
So it is again the emptiness
That creates usefulness.[158]

158 Lao-Tzeu, 'La voie et sa vertu', my trans., as cited in Robert Auzelle, *L'Architecte* (Paris: Vincent, Fréal & Cie, 1965), p.8.

The book is split into two parts:[159]

INTELLECTUAL FORMATION

1. Studies
2. Of intellectual honesty
3. Thinking justly
4. Of the imagination
5. Of the nature of images
6. The interior conquest of space
7. Freedoms and constraints

ON THE THRESHOLD OF PRACTICE

8. Apprenticeship
9. The architect and the environment
10. The architect and his client
11. The architect and duration
12. The evolutionary function
13. Architecture and urban planning

You feel that this must be a sign. You think that the book might reveal something to you — a legend or a key to an otherwise daunting and possibly indecipherable map.

Or, at the very least, it is a starting point.

The text is in French, a language not foreign but generally out of use to you. You do your best to translate what lies before you.

Like all architects and all architectures, however, the text is fundamentally idiosyncratic, with particularly defined and often rigid aims and underlying principles.

Like all architects and all architectures, the text may be examined and may be *useful* to some degree. Full of voids to fill and spaces to inhabit. The text may be useful as a guide

159 Ibid., p.9.

or a case study, but not as anything real, definitive or solid. Whatever that means. *Real.* La verité. The truth.

But then again, what is?

You decide that you are on the threshold of practice, and you will have to find the answers for yourself.

You write about the outside, the exterior.

You write about the inside, the interior.

You write as yourself.

You write as someone else.

You write as the person you could be, you would be.
And the person you could not, you would not —

You write about time.

You write about music — variations and vexations.

One day, you escape for a short while — from the building, and from yourself. Which turns out to be, as always, into yourself.

You meditate. You devote time to stillness and contemplation. You even, against your better judgment, pray.

You remember. You let recollection wash up, over, and around you. You focus on your breathing; you try not to drown.

You think that surely all of this *is* a sign, that it really *does* mean something, although you are unsure what.

You string together letters, words, sentences, paragraphs — similes, metaphors — meanders and some straight lines, too.

You combine observations, analyses of ratio, exercises in perspective, anecdotes, essays: anything that you can think of, in the hopes that it will add up to a whole. The sum of its parts.

You count: windows, doors, cells, loggias, hallways, rooms locked and open, stairs, columns, pillars, skylights, louvers, colours, lamps, toilets, showers, sinks, baths.

You go, you arrive, you stay, you think, you write, you watch, look, see, listen, hear, touch, feel, and then — you leave.

You hope that the writing will give a sense of movement, rather than stasis. The mind in the marvels and miseries of its makings.

You leave knowing no more and no less than that you were there, and that you are here.

I do not doubt interiors have their interiors, and exteriors have their exteriors, and that eyesight has another eyesight.[160]

What the light can do (a matter of perspective).

The Building waits.

It sits in the hills, in the distance. It breathes softly, wrapped in a pause. Silent and white, solid, concrete, self-contained.

The Building waitsfor everyone, and for no one. Its exterior is stalwart, a confident, autonomous presence — sovereign and absolute. Its interior is a different matter. Its interior life, that is. What the Building houses, its contents and the shapes they take — the rhythm, the movement, the pace. None of this is immediately apprehensible. From without, from within.

Although it is possible, within and without, to speculate that the two coincide in some way. Exterior and interior. Aside from the wall they share, of course, self-same.

Many paths lead to the Building — branched, snaking, straight — from all directions: through the adjacent woods, in and around the surrounding slopes, up from the valley below.

The official road approaches steeply from the north, rising above the small town at its base, through an even smaller town, past the stately grounds of an old farm and down a long path bordered by tall trees. The green is overwhelming — the green and the shade, which ripples with sun as the wind communes with the leaves so high above — whispers, waves, makes entreaties, shakes hands, sighs, doesn't stay, never settles.

The road becomes a path. And the foot of the path — or is it the mouth? — the mouth of the path, beyond which it is possible to travel only by foot, opens into the grounds that surround the building, where the route continues its linear trajectory to run along the eastern façade of the Building. But the first face encountered — the Building's first

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160 Walt Whitman, 'Faith Poem', in *Walt Whitman: Selected Poems 1855-1892*, ed. by Gary Schmidgall (London: St. Martin's Press, 2013), p. 153.

impression, its forward foot — is its northern countenance. The face that sits firmly, faces squarely. The face that hinges, connects, bisects foot and mouth — entrance and exit.

The Building is a square — a cube.

The Building is a square, aligned to the cardinal points — north, south, east, west — axes of orientation that determine how the sun, the light may pass through, move in and around, play across its walls at different times of day.

It is early afternoon, the sun overhead beginning to angle westward. The northern face is striking. A massive wall of unfinished concrete that rises five stories in height. In the half-light slant, all of its seams are visible as raised scars. Adjoining the lower left of the concrete face is a small, distinct structure —an undulant concrete wall that protrudes to enclose what might resemble, if envisioned from above, an ear-shaped appendix to the Building. Or an appendage — is appendage the more appropriate term for an ear? A listening, a hearing enclosure. From the top of the ear rise three conical shapes —light wells — each angled in a different direction. Funnels alighting lights to illumine some clandestine interior. Just to the right of the ear, the only punctures to punctuate the otherwise smooth concrete monolith of the north face, are four narrow, horizontal rectangular openings. Careful incisions to let the light in — exacted with exactitude, it seems, to ensure that not too much spills from the exterior to the interior. From without to within. Slippery, golden matter.

The Building gets nearer.
Or rather the path gets shorter.
Or rather the distance from the approach to the arrival decreases.

The north face faces blank and impassive — poker face — it holds few structural secrets, and yet its contents are a mystery, entirely concealed. Its sole idiosyncrasy, the only external indication of its purpose — the reason for the edifice, that is to say, *why* the Building is here, why the Building exists — is a small bell tower perched at the far left edge of the flat roof that the sheer concrete verticality rises up to meet. That is to say, where the vertical ends and the horizontal begins — self-same. It is an austere

construction, hardly a tower at all: the modest black bell is housed within a simple open square of concrete; its thick brown rope disappears into the building below. Perched atop the concrete square, the highest point of the Building, is a simple, black, iron cross.

There is one other protrusion from the roof, another concrete light well — again, carefully angled to an unknown in interior point.

Moving past the northern façade of the Building to its entrance at the edge of the eastern face, there is a view right into the cube and out the other side! Just a glimpse, but it is unmistakeable: the cube is not solid! The cube is full of slits and holes, apertures and appurtenances, views and purviews. For a moment, the sky blue sky presses through and fills this sliver with the green hills green beyond, winking colourfully as they are framed by flashing expanses of white walls within what appears to be a courtyard space. Somewhere inside of the cube there is another, secret space where lines play at meeting angles, raucously set in stone: they offer up shapes — volumes and voids — as only geometry can.

But the glimpse lasts for a moment only. The exterior of the Building offers just a hint of what is contained within its walls.

Catch this glimpse, but keep walking. Carry on. It is important to apprehend — as best possible — the whole sum of a structure before entering to engage with its parts.

The Building now shows its eastern face. To the immediate right, a freestanding concrete rectangle sits on a wide concrete floor. Slightly taller than the average person — the height, perhaps, of a man with his arms stretched overhead — it is the door: a frame, a beckoning. Just through it, to the right, a cluster of five small ovoid enclosures form a distinct complex, like a grouping of cells or molecules fused together. Stucco walls are topped by a flat roof that is rounded precisely to fit the shapes on which it rests, emphasizing the strange curves of their walls. A series of pods: each with four small square windows placed at diagonal intervals and three thin slits just below the roof. Though it seems unlikely that these achieve much by way of illumination.

The Building marshals light and space according to its own needs.

The path continues past the entrance. To the left is a low hill covered with trees, bushes, haphazard landscaping efforts. To the right, the Building's eastern façade express itself in three levels. At ground level, at eye level, are 11 vertical rectangles of glass — windows, panes separated by thin ribs of concrete at irregular widths that seem — nonetheless — to follow a pattern of sorts. Beyond them stretches a long white wall divided centrally by a line of 12 evenly-spaced horizontal rectangular windows.

Above this relatively plain ground floor sit two levels of a series of loggias made of rough concrete studded with small pebbles and shards of rock. There are 23 loggias per floor. The opening of each balcony is a square equal in size to the concrete grisaille beneath it, an even pattern of square incisions — 21 x 5 small holes that, at the right time of day, might throw a slow-moving checkerboard across the interior of the balcony. Only visible from within, of course. But, even from without, it is possible to imagine. What the light can do, that is.

The loggias are heavy in texture — solid and stable, neat, even squares, as though extracted from a table of elements. One leads to the next leads on to the next the next the next next next. Orderly progression. A cellular arrangement, yes — much like an organism. A hive! The Building is a hive, an ecosystem. The Building has a logic — parts that sit side by side, pieces that interlock, that depend on their relationship to the individual *and* to the collective in order to function. Each piece — part — individual — has a calling.

At the end of the eastern face, do not keep walking straight. Do not keep walking, do not follow the path that continues into the distance, that curves to the right and into the dense woods beyond, and the green fields beyond that, ringed by a long stone wall. A wall that is thick and solid, though crumbling in places.

No. At the end of the Eastern face, round the corner, turn right, to face west, and there, to the right, the Building continues — the Building presents its southern façade. A hill slopes downward — gently at first, the grade then steepens and with it the volume of the façade increases, heightens in equal measure until rather suddenly it looms and towers above, much taller that it seemed just moments ago, on flat ground, on even footing.

The plain white wall of the eastern ground floor rounds the corner, too — continuing its chalky divided stretch above and below more horizontal rectangular windows — this time, 21 in number. Where the white ends, the vertical panes of glass begin again. Another series of thin glass rectangles with their mysterious undulations.

42 in number — this façade — *l'éclairage* — is more illuminated.

Here, the Building is less parsimonious. Here, the Building favours light.

The Building favours height, too, perhaps out of necessity as it accommodates for the downward grade of the hill beneath. What before was solid ground drops away and, filling this newly vacated space, gives rise to slender support columns, spindly legs extend upwards to hold the weight of the Building. Between the columns, it is possible to see a play of shadows and sun across the earth — geometries of light and dark — clean lines, stark borders.

And the hive continues too! Around the corner and across two more levels — the hives buzz, the cells multiply with their evenly spaced loggias, stone grisailles — *brise-soleil*. 19 per floor, so now the count is at 84 — 84 worker bees, 84 cellular organisms, 84 mitochondria multiplying in obedient fashion.

Face the west, face the sun as it lowers in the sky.

Round the corner again, again turn right, walking the structure to face north and now to the right hand side is the western façade. Here, the Building rises and rises, taller still than before as its foundation of supporting columns is replaced with solid floors so that now it stands 5 stories in height and, OH –

Illumination!

L'éclairage indeed.

A far cry from the concrete monolith of the north face. The undulating vertical panes of glass wrap around from the western façade and multiply — shatter — scream — stream

— a dawn chorus, across the three lower floors. Three long walls of windows, width-to-width, like an elaborate glass neck collar. All articulated in a swell of slender panes. From the ground up — 27, 61, 67 windows. Windows equalled in number alone by the concrete ribs that separate them, marking densities along a line in space — a line that it is possible to imagine, given the impression of rhythm and pattern, might stretch far into the distance. Perhaps a line that *does* stretch into the distance, its axes and coordinates invisible to the naked eye — insubstantial panes, taking great pains.

Face the sun as it faces the windows and lowers ever lower in the western sky, and it is possible to imagine the refrain of light that would echo across the surfaces of the rooms behind their faces. Only visible from within, of course.

Above, now far above — lean back — crane the neck — more cells, with their sturdy loggias. A comfort, such solidity, above this riotous chorus of fenestration. 18 hives, 18 cells on each floor. So now there is a total of 120. 120 tiny cells working together, working apart.

Lit up by the late-afternoon sun, think that their whiteness seems magnificent. In one of the cells towards the centre of the top row, someone's curtains, pulled across the loggia's opening, are blowing in the wind. They are blowing from the concrete enclosure and out into the air — fabric the faded pink produced only by something that, before the sun, was once a deep red. A red that has swallowed the noon to late to setting sun of many days, weeks, months, years. Lives — perhaps it has swallowed lives, the red and the sun both. Bees give their lives to the hive — wholly, completely, unquestioningly. Lovingly — perhaps. For the hive is a home. The Building is a home.

A hand reaches out to pull the curtains back in — to stop them flying and flapping, lapping at the air, the undesignated space beyond.

At the end of the western façade, leave behind the windows, the sun, the brilliant white, the tonguing, whispering pink. Stop for a moment and see the other side of the concrete monolith glimpsed upon the initial approach to the Building.

See that the monolith does not comprise just one face, but is rather a solid rectangular volume of concrete — four blank, solid walls, whose rough seams do nothing to obscure their making. The force, the solidity of their volume, a steadfast erection, a magnitude of materiality.

See that this volume is not directly attached to the east — south — west arms that enclose the centre of the cube. The north face is in fact the north face of a rectangular volume that stands on its own, linked only by a narrow bridge of concrete joined to the far left side of the top of the western façade.

See that at the short end of the rectangle, which faces West, a small concrete protrusion hangs out of the enormous structure like a tiny geometric posterior, a slight, angular hump.

It is an organ, perhaps.
Terza rima.
It is a heart.
Every building has one.

See the space between the concrete volume and the rest of the complex to which it attaches. The concrete volume, with its listening ear and its tiny beating heart.

See that there is a space — an opening big enough to walk through. See that the opening leads to an enclosure at the centre of the cube — the hole in the whole — the middle of the middle — the heart, yes — the heart of the heart of the matter, the secret space earlier espied. See that it is possible to go to that place – right there, not far. See that the whole exterior of the Building has been circled, observed, counted, accounted for. See that it is possible, with just some minor difficulty, with ever so slightly uneven footing, a mild uphill ascent, to go inside of it now: to walk right in (step right up).

And — without thinking about it too much longer — do.

But I see that instead of a letter I am in the process of writing an essay.

Letter from Schiller to Goethe, 23 August 1749

The Night Office.

26 March.

Dear X.,

I am here.
I am finally here.

***Le Couvent de Sainte-Marie de la Tourette*, Le Corbusier and Iannis Xenakis, 1959**

I am here, and I am writing to you — as I once said I would.

And the essay, cruel mistress, is here too. She has been with me for months now. Years, it sometimes seems. Haunting the margins, crouched on my back. Some days, we fly together, *at one with the drive into the red eye, the cauldron of morning.*[161] Others, her knees press into my shoulderblades, hard, and she uses my hair for reins, wrenches my neck this way and that, mercilessly directs my gaze, rides me right into the ground.

Yet I am happy to carry on — *horses, horses, horses, horses* — because I enjoy the relentless company — the embrace of conflict, the refusal of resolution. Yes, I like the discomfort, and sometimes even the pain: it reminds me to press where it hurts, to examine carefully the map of bruises, to scrutinise the terrain. And her vast host of acolytes reassure with their words. A callous kindness, a ferocious consolation — thin wire, pure vein of ore — a glistening at the centre. I find myself almost believing her promises.

Meanwhile, as if tired with company, the mind steals off to muse in solitude; to think, not to act; to comment, not to share; to explore its own darkness, not the bright-lit-up surface of others. It turns to Donne, to Montaigne, to Sir Thomas Browne, to the keepers of the keys of solitude.[162]

The trip here was curious, though uneventful. I packed last night, excitedly, so that I would be ready to leave early this morning at 4.30am — even before the beginning cracks of dawn, the sky still nighttime pitch. It felt illicit, like an escape — hushed and undercover. I suppose it is, in a way — I told hardly anyone about my plans. I wanted to avoid having to explain what it was, what it meant. When the words came out, they

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161 Sylvia Plath, 'Ariel', in *Ariel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p.37.

162 Virginia Woolf, 'Notes on an Elizabethan Play', in *The Common Reader* (San Diego: Harcourt and Brace, 1948), p.85.

sounded paltry, stupid and lacking the drive of my intentions: 'the essay — convent — writing — solitude — structure — forms meeting forms — parallels — metaphor — to be — to be — *alone* – to see what happens…' Or maybe they simply sounded mad. Maybe they sounded desperate and seeking. Maybe they were. Maybe I am. At times I found myself pitching it as a project about Le Corbusier and/or Iannis Xenakis, as though that would somehow be more legitimate than a project about writing, about being a writer. About the *aboutness* of something.

Is it a contradiction to believe that one gets space from oneself by being alone? Thoreau, famous solitary soul, wrote in his journals, 'you think that I am impoverishing myself withdrawing from men, but in my solitude I have woven for myself a silken web or chrysalis, and nymph-like, shall ere long burst forth a more perfect creature, fitted for a higher society.'[163] I like the idea that in solitude, in contemplation, we become better versions of ourselves. Only, how could you ever know? Could your self sit in judgment, comparing yourself to yourself? *Look how far yourself has come! Well done! Your self is ready to get back out there now!* In Emily Dickinson's first correspondence to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who would later become a literary mentor, she wrote, 'Are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive? The mind is so near itself it cannot see, and I have none to ask.'[164]

The essay is like writing an endless letter to a version of yourself that you don't know yet, hoping to solicit both understanding and incisive criticism. The essay is like trying to train a camera lens on something that is always in flux — it judders slightly, zooms in and out, makes tiny adjustments. This is why we build our machines to keep things steady, in focus — knowing that the eye strays, the hand shakes.

You were always telling me that I was a writer — *you've got chops*, you said once. Years later, even though this fact is now obvious to me, along with the incontrovertible evidence that I spend nearly all of my time writing, I still have difficulty with the moniker. Writer. I am a *writer*. Do I lack the confidence to embrace the role? Am I afraid it would mean I had to try harder, be better, admit to wanting more? Or is it that the

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163 Henry David Thoreau, '8 February 1857' [Journals], in *The Heart of Thoreau's Journals* (New York: Dover Publications, 1961), p.173.

164 Emily Dickinson, 'Letter to Mr. T.W. Higginson, April 16, 1862', in *Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Mineola, NY: Courier Corporation, 2012), p.253.

notion of vocation — a calling — a desire — is somehow embarrassing, particularly when it involves an avowed pursuit of turning inwards, circling the I. Why would it be important? What good would it do anybody?

Only a person who is congenitally self-centred has the effrontery and the stamina to write essays… Some people find the essay the last resort of the egoist, a much too self-conscious and self-serving form for their taste; they feel it is presumptuous of a writer to assume that his little excursions or his small observations will interest the reader.[165]

But it's not the excursions or the observations that are of importance in themselves — it's how they are relayed, how they are asked to mean, and to whom. As Vivian Gornick writes, 'what happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the larger sense that the writer is able to make of what happened.'[166] Not just in narrative form, but in language itself. In the essay, the concern becomes not knowledge proper, but the means by which we contain and define it.[167] The essay makes demands; it picks apart the linguistic conventions of the individual and of experience; it wants the treatment of knowledge, of language, and of the self to be one and the same — discursive, 'a coming together of dissonant perspectives in order to restore the lived world, at the risk of incongruity and imprecisions'.[168]

Or, as Adorno wrote, *the objectivity of dialectical cognition needs not less subjectivity, but more.*[169]

So I am here — alone, *seul*, *solitaire*, as they say, with my books and my papers and my pens, my broken French and my halting, stuttering desires. Was it Da Vinci who said, 'while you are alone you are entirely your own?'.[170]

Perhaps it will seem perverse to you, this letter with all of its inane details, as it is some time since we have been in touch. You will forgive me for saying it is possible that you — *you* — function, here and now, in something of an abstract capacity. But, well, we all

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165 E.B. White, as cited in George Douglas Atkins, *Tracing the Essay: Through Experience to Truth* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2005), p.47.

166 Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2009), p.91.

167 Kurt Spellmeyer, 'A Common Ground: The Essay in the Academy', *College English*, 51.3 (1989), pp.262-276 (p.265).

168 Ibid., p.263.

169 Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: A&C Black, 1973), p.40.

170 Leonardo Da Vinci, *The Da Vinci Notebooks* (London: Profile Books, 2011), p.66.

need a destination at which to air our utterances, don't we? Perhaps I am writing to you now, tallying these scores, in order to prove to myself that I exist.

Or maybe it's just easier if you pretend that someone else is there — reading, listening, hearing. The beginning, the initial address, is always the hardest part. The awkward, creaky limbs and hinges of a thing that cannot yet see its own shape, cannot move freely and unencumbered by the notional weight of all that is to come.

How do I know what I think till I see what I say?[171]

Sometimes you need to let the story lead the way; allow the place, the time, the space to tell you how to pray. I suppose I have dragged here with me the essay as my altar. A high stack of books, an unconquerable, uncontainable form. Wild and bitchy, crazy eyes and I's. *Draggy and saggy. Baggy and shaggy. Like a hag, haggy.*[172] But she's exquisite, too; and there are so many furrows and folds, places to curl up in and sleep forever and ever and dream and dream. So I'm following her, and trying to remember that we must learn to account for ourselves. What does the essay want? Perhaps I should not ask what I can do for the essay, but what the essay can do for me. Perhaps I could learn to be the master — *Patria mia* — *Dios mios* — I could be the sun, the fortunate son. Perhaps we could all be a great many things.

And yet, it's nice to think that there must be a reason that people do what they do, make what they make. How they see, what they want and love and hate, and why and when and wherefore. What determines the degree to which interests and desires change and shift over the course of a life?

Take Le Corbusier, for instance.

Le Corbusier who, in 1918, when he was still Charles Edouard Jeanneret, wrote of the 'new Pythagoras' — urging artists to turn their focus to the Golden Section and other ideas of classical proportion: a call to replace the chaos, decadence, and sensuality of the pre-war period with the 'purity of classical rationalism'. Maximum efficiency through

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171 E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), p.99.

172 Steven Millhauser, 'The Voice in the Night', in *The Best American Short Stories 2013*, ed. by Elizabeth Strout (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), p.91.

mathematic calculation as the aim of evolution: 'a work of art should induce a sensation of mathematical order, and the means of inducing this mathematical order should be sought among universal means…ECONOMY is the law of natural selection'.[173]

Le Corbusier, who — under the aegis of the Communist Party staged an intervention at a famous public symposium at the Maison de la Culture in Paris. 'The Quarrel with Realism' — a provocative performance in which he spoke rhapsodically in praise of the machine. It's hard to imagine, so unlike his later, sober, carefully measured self — stable incarnation of the serious 'auteur' figure he claimed to loathe earlier in his career.

Le Corbusier with his grand plans for the *Pavilion de L'Esprit Nouveau*, for the 1925 International Exhibition in Paris. The ensuing conflict and the red tape and the compromises — the models for the *Immeubles Villas*, a Utopian housing complex, destined to remain unconstructed.

Le Corbusier, who by turns amazes and repels with his clarity and self-assurance. In 1932 he wrote to Victor Nekrasov with his philosophy of the fresco:

I accept the fresco not as something which gives emphasis to a wall, but on the contrary as a means to destroy the wall violently, to remove any notion of its stability, weight, etcetera…If the Sistine Chapel's wall and ceiling were intended to be preserved as form, they should not have been painted with frescoes, it means that someone wanted to remove forever their original architectural character and create something else. Which is acceptable.[174]

And we know about the 'frescoes' Le Corbusier painted without permission — and in the nude, no less — at Eileen Gray's house not so far from here, on the coast just outside of Nice. Was he trying to destroy her walls violently? To create something else? *Sledge, sledge, sledgehammer.*

I struggle not to feel alienated here, in this building, and out of my depth. Le Corbusier is, in many ways, a macho figure — and his followers, disciples of Corbu, are so frequently male and rather *adamant* about things, not least their adulation and reverence. To be honest, I prefer Gray's *E-1027*. Though perhaps it's too easy to see the two in a

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173 Charles Edouard Jeanneret and Amédée Ozenfant, 'Purism', in *Modern Artists on Art,* ed. by Robert L. Herbert (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2000), p.56.

174 Le Corbusier, 'Letter to Viktor Nekrasov, 1932', as cited in Richard Serra, '*Tilted Arc* Destroyed', *Writings/Interviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.203.

gendered competition that might not in fact have existed. *Might* not. But why the petulance, then, the priapic painting?

Like all human beings, Le Corbusier is full of inconsistencies and vulnerabilities, thwarted projects and failures. The sad earnestness of the interwar period, for example, in which he vehemently championed industry and mechanical evolution: the machine as freedom. Not unlike his Russian compatriots, 'Architecture as Revolution', etc. Before it became abundantly clear that the machine, with its terrible exacting logic, could also be annihilation. The fine, dangerous line of Utopian visions, which are perhaps best served as discursive rather than constructive models. Easy to say in hindsight; and would not any of us make the same error — attempting to outfit hope with tools.

And then there's the scandal of St. Baume, where the architect was commissioned to design a modern hermitage to house the relics of Mary Magdalene. His sketches and plans were attacked by Catholics and atheists alike, and the project never came to fruition. Matters of Faith are precarious things, especially when you try to set them in stone. Careful with that chisel and hammer.

Yet, amidst all of the detail, it reamins difficult to get a picture of the man. Or his interior, at least. I wonder how he felt about all of this — the ecstatic, winding trajectory of his career — the ups and downs, the fallings in and out. Le Corbusier, Charles Edouard Jeanneret, champion of the pseudonym, the remaking of the self. Are the man and the architecture divisible in any way? Did he ever have a crisis of faith and consider pursuing a different vocation? Le Corbusier, the high school maths teacher? Le Corbusier, the farmer? Le Corbusier, the happily married civil servant who eats roast beef and drinks sherry every Sunday afternoon while he and his wife listen to the wireless? One suspects not. Those whose lives bear traces of the messianic are nearly always driven inescapably by its force, no matter the incarnation.

And we all have our Quarrels with Realism. Antiquity v. Modernity, Natural v. Artificial, Empirical v. Theoretical, Objective v. Subjective. How to make anything new, in any day and age, considering everything that has come before. All the different versions of what constitutes a representation, an interpretation, a criticism of an object or subject.

There is the case of Iannis Xenakis, too. Although he is not frequently or completely credited with regards to his contributions to La Tourette, it everywhere bears traces of his hand, his mind. And his origins and mythologies are perhaps even more extreme than those of Le Corbusier.

Xenakis, which means 'little stranger', and whom Milan Kundera called 'the prophet of insensitivity'.[175]

Xenakis, who spent most of WWII engaged in various forms of resistance against the Italians, then the Germans, and then the British. Xenakis, who nearly died fighting, wounded by shrapnel that destroyed his left eye and part of his cheek, leaving him disfigured. Who, in order to escape internment in a prison camp, fled to Paris in 1947 on a forged passport, where he landed — having previously been trained as an engineer — a job in Le Corbusier's atelier.

In Paris, he was excluded from the music scene. In absence of a classical background, he could find no entry point for his early forays. Xenakis, who finally met Olivier Messiaen, who told him, 'You are 30; You have the fortune of being Greek, an architect, and of having studied specific mathematics. Take advantage of those things. Do them in your music.'[176] Xenakis also found peers in Pierre Boulez, Luigi Nono, and Karlheinz Stockhausen, who similarly railed against the tyranny of classical harmony — Western music's categories, which were 'too tainted by "culture"', and thereby impeded the production of a 'universal music'.[177]

Xenakis, who would spend much of his life investigating Stochastic processes, testing their principles via various sonic incarnations. Controlled indeterminacy, randomness fixed within a field. Xenakis' interest in a chaotic probability is evident in his early description of a moment of conflict witnessed in the Greek Resistance.

The clamour fills the city, and the inhabiting force of voice and rhythm reaches a climax. It is an event of great power and beauty in its ferocity. Then the impact between the demonstrators and the enemy occurs… Imagine, in addition, the reports of dozens of machine guns and the whistle of bullets adding

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175 Milan Kundera, as cited in Sharon Kanach and Carey Lovelace, 'Curator's Statement', in Iannis Xenakis, Sharon Kanach and Carey Lovelace, *Iannis Xenakis: Composer, Architect, Visionary* (New York: The Drawing Centre, 2010), p.19.

176 Ivan Hewitt, 'A Music Beyond Time', in *Iannis Xenakis: Composer, Architect, Visionary*, p.26.

177 Ibid., p.32.

their punctuations to this total disorder. The crowd is then rapidly dispersed, and after sonic and visual hell follows a detonating calm, full of despair, dust, and death. The statistical laws of these events, separated from their political or moral context, are the same as those of the cicadas or the rain. They are the laws of the passage from complete order into total disorder in a continuous or explosive manner. They are stochastic laws.[178]

From this event, one can find reflections in all of the ripples that ripple outwards through his work — currents, strains, strings, plucked and vibrating.

People's histories are strange. Head on, seen from various angles and perspectives, refracted, coming in and out of focus. How long it takes to discover who one is, how one sees, hears, builds the world — what materials and properties fit, afford a kind of truth, slip on like a second skin. It is the details — the compromises and contradictions, the failures — that I will always find most interesting. The fissures between all of the well-fleshed bits, the dark slivers of subjectivity that reveal desire and intention *before* function and structure set it in stone. It is the gaps that tell us what we want, what is still waiting to be filled. *Now I am quietly waiting for the catastrophe of my personality to seem beautiful again, and interesting, and modern.*[179] Perhaps it is good, it just, it is wise to be riddled with holes. The riddle of the self. The catastrophe of personality.

There are as many kinds of essays as there are human attitudes or poses…The essayist can put on any sort of shirt, be any sort of person, according to his mood or his subject matter – philosopher, scold, jester, raconteur, confidante, pundit, devil's advocate, enthusiast.[180]

I used to wonder if everywhere you go a version of yourself remains behind. The version of you that could only have been there, brought into existence by a particular, finite, set of operations and principles. The point where a series of axes and lines meet and intersect. So that, depending on how often you travel, the world is populated by these self-same selves. Doppelgängers. All of the people you have been at different times and locations. Or maybe the people you *wished* you had been.

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178 Iannis Xenakis, 'Free Stochastic Music', in *Formalized Music: Thought and Mathematics in Composition* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 1992), p.9.

179 Frank O'Hara, 'Mayakovsky', in *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p.202.

180 E.B. White, 'Foreword', in *Essays of E.B. White* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p.vii.

To have been oneself, and also to have been nobody at all, that is the question. In each new place, to have never thought, written, or known anything — arriving with no baggage to speak of — would it be a liberation or a terrible confinement?
The allure of the pure task, the mission — clear and unfettered, focused only on what is at hand. But life isn't like that — clear, piercing arrow. Instead, it bubbles and whispers, under the surface and in the high-leaved trees. The self is an arborescence— wanting to be all things multiple, rather than singular selves — and daring narrative to find a way to incorporate her chimera.

So you see, there's no reason to be offended, for both you *and* I are abstractions — in this and in all cases. The endless disappointment of pronouns; the distance is never quite sufficient, always seems measured and parsimonious. I always want more *space* for my warring selves. Attempting to marry them in a unified voice is one of the most violent activities I can think of, but if they aren't of equal weight and strength, they'll kill each other. That is to say: both *you* and *I* will be destroyed.

The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me.[181]

I feel uneasy here at *Le Couvent*, dwarfed by the seeming certitude of its architecture. As though I might not be able to write about it in an interesting way. Or that I will privilege the things I am already drawn to — psychology and narrative over architectures and equations. Maybe I have a form hangover, still clinging to its soft, yielding folds. Not yet ready to understand that you can enter a body and leave it, too —go into something else entirely — push past the flesh to get to the bare bones at the centre.

What is my scepticism? Is it that architecture, more so than other creative endeavours, seems to imply that it can provide, that there in fact *are* solutions to problems? Answers to questions? On the most basic level, buildings accomplish something quite, well, *concrete*. They enclose and demarcate spaces, provide shelter. Degrees of success seem relatively easy to determine. Does the ceiling leak? Do the walls crumble? Does the foundation sink, slope, crack? Maybe this is the difference between a mere building and work of architecture. The latter includes a relationship to the meeting of form with

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181 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. by Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.73.

function: how far and how ambitiously either may be invoked, the one yoked to the other.

Like concept and metaphor. Can you build it? Does it *stand*? Will people come, will they want to live there? Will they understand what you wanted to make, before, during, and after, as you stand there on the threshold, holding the door open, beckoning — please, s'il vous plait, voulez vous, entrez.

Every thing, every person has an architecture, a composition. A means to enclose and to envelop the silence. To possess and make more palatable the fulsome emptiness of space.

A structure, an armature, deeply embedded.

I want to see the skeleton, to lace my fingers through its spine. I want to feel how the backbone holds — the knobs of its vertebrae neatly interlinked with my knuckles, notches between notches, hand wrapped around, holding tight holding fast holding on for — dear —

I want to grasp it, intimately, and to shake it — to rattle the bones in their bony cage — just to hear the sound it will make.

Earlier today, as the sun was setting, I walked around the exterior of the convent. You wouldn't have believed the light. It spilled over everything — strange and stark across the pale surfaces of the concrete walls. Shadows and shapes shifted, prismatic and unpredictable, thrown off in every direction, across the various surfaces of the building, and the ground beneath.

Though I am not fond of taking photographs, I brought a camera with me on this trip. Barthes called cameras 'clocks for seeing',[182] and I imagine my camera unlocked in me a ravenous structural mania that could have lasted mere minutes, or lengthened, unfolded, and exposed over hours. Possessed by the pure geometries of the place and how readily they seemed to offer themselves up to my frames, I paced the building: around and

182 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000), p.15.

around, inside, outside, close up, at a distance. Only — I felt *guilty*, somehow. And also frustrated — I could never get the whole building into one image — the picture was never the whole picture. Images are seductive. Unlike words, they have borders. But these too are arbitrary, conflicted, revealing. And, like anything else that tries to contain itself, they can bleed out. They can bleed out and die right there on the table in front of you.

What do you take a picture of when you photograph a building? Only the walls, and not the spaces they generate. The volume contained *by* the walls. When you preserve an image of a place, it is an afterimage only — as walls are afterimages, afterthoughts, symptoms of space and place, and not these things themselves.

Like words on a page. Like letters, and this letter to you. This act of writing is an act of will, forcing you to remember me. Here is the Polaroid portrait I made for you — see the image forming as it is exposed to the air — a dark centre with a dark form, features slowly becoming visible. Wait for the click. *I'm waitin' for that click and I don't get it. Listen, I'm all alone. I'm talkin' to no one where there's absolute quiet.*[183]

And so I deleted all of the photographs, quickly, before I could think otherwise — erased my eyes, cleaned my slate — and went back inside.

I walked around some of the hallways of the building, again struck by the light that entered the space and stretched across the walls at long, afternoon angles. Rough white concrete with vertical rectangular windows and shutters painted bright colours — red, yellow, green. I could hear footsteps echoing behind me, sometimes close, sometimes barely audible, but I saw no one. The friars? Or one of the people from the architectural centre? I notice there is only one other guest here at the moment, her room is right next to mine. Barbara Toronato. I know because it says on the door — a small white placard with tiny writing. There's one on my door too, Emily LaBarge.

Barbara. I haven't seen her, but I can hear her now, just on the other side of the wall. Does she sit and write, as I do now? I wonder what she is doing here, and if she feels as

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183 Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (New York: New Directions, 2004), p.100

overwhelmed as I do. Barbara, how do you do? What do you do? Why are you here? To whom do you speak or write, to whom do you implore — to what distant address?

I am worried that my insomnia will return while I am here. That I will be wakeful all night long, alone in my cell, alone in the hills. It must be said, I would be in good company — rising in the night, wandering, muttering to myself, sitting to write or to read until the disquiet passes. The Dominican Order operates under a routine of prayers, loosely broken into 5 parts: The Night Office/Matins, Morning Lauds, The Little Day Hours, Vespers, and Compline. The Night Office, or Matins, is the period of time that leads up to the start of the day. Some devotees rise at midnight, some later, 2 or 3am — whenever the struggle of the self is deepest, is darkest. This is the time at which commences the cycle of prayer that will evolve and move through stages as the day progresses, from low to higher, then highest contemplation.

With luck, you will survive until Matins.[184]

In this moment, you are supposed to look ahead at what you want to accomplish. What it is you are asking, the many questions and the answers at which they drive. You ask for the strength to pursue them, to have faith.

I don't believe in God, but it would be nice to have a plan, don't you think? A plan for the day ahead — one that you forge before the sun has even thought of showing its face. A plan laid down, clear and sure, and if you follow it, you will achieve what you desire — because the following itself is the desire, is the achievement.

Tomorrow, I will not feel daunted and small. I will begin my research. I will walk the grounds, and I will not worry about footsteps down empty hallways or photographs taken and erased. Tomorrow, I will engage with the building on the terms it proposes. I will submit myself to its layout— the form and function of its rooms, each with a distinct intentionality, individual and also part of a whole. I will ask questions: what will happen to me — what will it feel like — how will I change and what will change around me?

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184 Donald Barthelme, 'The Indian Uprising', in *Sixty Stories* (London: Penguin, 2003), p.140.

And I will wait. I will wait to see. I will wait to inhabit and to be inhabited. Because this — this is what I came for, more than anything.

Yes, tomorrow. I have a plan.

Until then.

Yours truly,
Emily

My not-I is significant and surpasses me. Yet she is I to me.[185]

Not I.

Barbara: I have a plan. I rise early — in the still dark still night light of the still just before dawn hours. I rise early and the day stretches before me — sharp, shining and keen —the whet blade of a knife. I have a plan and all seems clear and my mind yearns forward, its gentle ministrations growing in force and movement as it picks up speed and begins to pace. I rise. I rise, and I begin to walk. Footfalls — perambulatory prayers. This is how the day begins. I have a plan.

Author: I can hear movement in the room next door. Barbara. Barbara rises early to prepare for the day. Barbara has a plan. I am still cloaked in the night and the heavy darkness of dreams — their silent moth wings brushing against my face, soft peripheral flutterings. Barbara is always one step ahead of me. I envy and admire her clarity, her sense of purpose — the way she seems to know what the day holds for her, and she goes forth fearlessly, doubtlessly to meet it. From whence the resolve, the steadfastness, the unwavering line? Barbara's trajectory is straight and sure, like an arrow, an axis — clean angles, long horizons, unobscured distances. My line undulates, a wave, a sonogram — the pulse and beat of a darkling heart, strange arrhythmia.

Barbara: The day ushers me forth, even and surefooted. I begin by walking the halls. I begin by counting — one to a thousand — and as the numbers go higher, I escalate with them — I descend, ascend, all levels and heights — around corners and down long halls. One hand always outstretched, running against the wall — compass, palmistry, assurance. One hand outstretched, a running tally, pulling an invisible string of thread through the labyrinth, counting towards a state of grace.

Author: Barbara is counting again. Her footsteps approach and recede — descend ascend — turn corners, echo down hallways. This place is like a metronome — 6/8, 4/4, 3/3, 2/4 — yes, 2/4, which we call *cut time*. Cut time, where I wait, in this cell — enclosed — divided, divisible. Cut time, where I breathe irregularly between Barbara's even beats. Trills, syncopation, improvisation — Barbara is the theme and I am the

185 Clarice Lispector, *A Breath of Life*, trans. by Johnny Lorenz (London: Penguin, 2014), p.26

variation, contrapuntal. Her technique is a perfect dressage — manicured, polished, high-stepping. Me — mine — something else entirely.

Barbara: I begin to understand the logic of a place by moving through it. Geometries, angles, heights, widths, volumes. These are the things that I see, these are the things that see me. We recognise each other — we are compatible — sympatico — *sympathîque.*

Author: 'What is congruency?'
I saw it written in a notebook that I found lying open on a table in the refectory. Barbara's unmistakeable penmanship, neat and flawlessly executed across each page. What is *contiguity*, I thought — what is *consanguinity*? The veins, the red threads that connect the different parts of an organism. Keep the blood flowing from one area to another — keep the whole, the sum of the parts, alive.

Barbara: I am a triangle. I am a pyramid — at each point, at each angle, a different self of myself looks inward to a central point. Where their gazes meet is the centre — the secret suspended deep within. The secret, yes — the logic of a unified perspective. I proceed, I move towards it according to stable variables. I formulate, I calculate.

Author: I am a spiral, all curves, finesse, and intuition. I have no access to the concision of angles, though I admire their austere beauty. And I rely on them, as they on me — orbitals need a fixed point, a node around which to orbit. And without the line of orbit, the central node is merely a point in time, in space — discrete, resigned to its fixity.

Barbara: I have misplaced my notebook, and with it all of the careful, painstaking notes and determinations therein. The Fibonacci Sequence, the Golden Section, the Modulor. I have been examining their properties and intersections, trying to understand how they might give rise to a series of ratios and proportions. How they might organise light, space, and time — all of the things — height, width, length — that come together to produce volume. Or, simply put, Architecture.

Author: I didn't *steal* the book. I only *borrowed* it. For safe-keeping, really. What if someone else came along and found it? What if it ended up in the wrong hands? Of

course I couldn't resist looking inside — just a peek. What does Barbara think about all of the time? What does she write? What is her secret, what turns her crank, what makes her tocker tick?

Barbara: It seems unlike me to lose something so important, so belaboured. Did someone steal it? But who else is here? Perhaps another has arrived — though I have seen no one. The thing is, regardless, the book would be useless to anyone else, its contents indecipherable. It is written in shorthand —a code of my own devising. One that is suitable to my needs, to my aims and goals, which are mine and mine alone. Written, read, understood only by me — by me only. Moi, seul, solitaire.

Author: It is indecipherable! Save its epigraph, the question of congruency, I can read none of the contents of Barbara's book. It is full of equations, formulas, calculations. And in between, further explications in a language so foreign that the words resemble hieroglyphs, Cyrillic script. A reminder that no one ever really speaks the same language, even if the signs and symbols might appear to be the same. I spent some time trying to work it out, flipping through the book, angling it this way and that, imagining that I *was* Barbara — trying to find a point of entry. I re-arranged letters, tried different algorithms —colour-coded according to various principles of composition. But it remains impervious, an impasse — and I, outside of it. I would like to return it to her — to Barbara — having sensed it is of great importance. But, you see, I accidentally made permanent marks on some of the pages. So now she will know. Barbara will know that I tried to understand, and also that I failed. I feel ashamed.

Barbara: St. Dominic had 4 names —
Dominic of Osma
Dominic of Caleruga
Dominic de Guzmán
Domingo Félix de Guzmán

Author: Fra Angelico had 4 names —
Guido di Pietro
Fra Giovanni da Fiesole
Fra Giovanni Angelico

il Beato Angelico

Barbara: Orthonym, Autonym, Pseudonym, Heteronym. Proto, para, meta —

Author: Fernando Pessoa had too many names to list —
Alberto Caiero
Ricardo Reis
Àlvaro de Campos
Bernardo Soares
Claude Pasteur
Frederick Wyatt
Etc.
It started because he thought it was impossible for one writer to unify all of his different modes of expression. Ideologically and formally, as well as with regards to public taste and general consumption. Then things got out of hand — the names wouldn't stop — they just — kept — on — coming —

Barbara: Is it possible to be, to *have* multiple people within? Naming seems so irrelevant to me — that which we call a rose, and so on. People call me many things. I call myself one thing only — *I*.

Author: I sometimes feel that I am not living my own life. That someone else is behind — inside — in front of — beside — around me — an external mechanism, a force that I do not control. Something has plunged its fingers right into my body, pushed past the rib cage to the spine and holds fast — its fingers laced through my vertebrae. Sometimes I can feel it grip harder and shake. It shakes me to my core. Though it is possible that this is simply desire. Yes, that which drives, propels, encourages motion. Sticky fingers. Soiled gloves. Where did Barbara come from, and why can she do all of the things that I cannot?

Barbara: It is true, though, that I am fond of a poem I read long ago —
Rapelle-toi Barbara
Il pleuvait sans cesse sur Brest ce jour-là
Et tu marchais souriante

Épanouie ravie ruisselante
Sous la pluie
Rappelle-toi Barbara[186]

It is a sad poem, in the end, but still, I sometimes say to myself — *Rappelle-toi Barbara* — Remember, Barbara. To remember. To be remembered. A reminder, a prayer, a consolation.

Author: I have only one other name — Bernadette. My Catholic name — chosen, just between you and me, after the Four Tops song of the same title.

Bernadette, people are searching for
the kind of love that we possess.
Some go on searchin' their whole life through
and never find the love I've found in you.
(Oooooh!)[187]

The lyrics aren't much without the tune. And I have since become less sentimental. 'Walk Away Renee' might have been a better choice. Although there is no Saint Renee. I never got to use 'Bernadette' in any case — falling out of Faith shortly after confirmation. So while I feel an affinity of sorts, I suspect that we — Bernadette and I — do not share similar belief systems. And who are these abstracts in any case, these other selves? What are the points, the *congruencies* at which they emerge? What is it that opposites seem to imply?

Barbara: The hallways are long and white, punctuated by windows — long horizontals that run like sentences around and around and around the building. Verb, clause, noun, subject, pronoun, adjective, conjunction, article, modifier, predicate, preposition, pronoun. Comma, semi-colon, emdash, endash, exclamation point! Parse, portion, knit, purl. And through their panes beyond, verdant flashes, the green of meaning. I thought I heard someone coming, from the corner at the far end of the hallway behind me. I didn't turn around to look, but instead rushed on hurriedly and ducked down a set of stairs to the floor below.

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186 Jacques Prévert, 'Barbara', *Paroles* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 1958), p.52.

187 Brian Holland, Lamont Dozier, and Edward Holland Jr., 'Bernadette', *Reach Out* (Tamla Motown, MTM S-3069, 1967)

Author: As I walked down the hallway just now, I thought I saw someone at the end — far ahead of me — a shadowy figure, tall and slender, moving with purpose, as though to some kind of invisible rhythm or beat. I was about to call out to her, just to say hello, but instead slowed my pace to linger behind until she had vanished from sight.

Barbara: Adagio. Largo. Presto. Vivace.

Author: Prime. Terce. Sext. None.

Barbara: The truth is, I would rather be alone.

Author: The truth is, I would rather be alone.

Barbara: Though I am sometimes crushed by a certain type of lonely feeling.

Author: Though I am sometimes crushed by a certain type of lonely feeling.

Barbara: It's not that I mind the company — just that I have such important work to get on with. And writing is truly a solitary activity, in spite of all the other incorporeal selves and souls that may or may not attend.

Author: It's not that I mind the company — just that I have such important work to get on with. And writing is truly a solitary activity, in spite of all the other incorporeal selves and souls that may or may not attend.

Barbara: I think, too, that if I stop moving, I will cease to exist. Because what I want, what I am looking for, the crux of all of these motions and shapes, is something impossible. To reunite with myself. Which —were I a believer — might be something close to seeing God. The radiant world beyond this one. Where all of the angles and planes line up. Where everything makes sense and you can reach out to touch and trace all of the strings and wires, the lines and lineages that attach everything. See them stretched taut — pluck them delicately — hear the tight reverberations. Everything that makes the world the way it is. The reason behind the *I* — that lonely indicator. All of this I want and more. Hence the rigour. The endless numbers, sequences, tempos — *largo,*

grave, moderato. And so I keep walking, I keep walking, still walking still — hand outstretched — feet falling — footfalls. Rappelle-toi, Barbara.

Author: Is it enough to know, simply, that Barbara exists? Sweet changeling, tender moniker?

Barbara: *What?*

Author: Yes. Yes. It is enough to know that she is, that she wants, that she writes and walks and counts and recites — without knowing what or why or when or where.

Barbara: *Who?*

Author: It is enough to know that she is there, outside of me, keeping time. Barbara —

Barbara: *No!*

Author: Not I.

Barbara: *She.*

Author: *SHE!*[188]

188 Samuel Beckett, *Not I* (London: Faber & Faber, 1973), p.15.

It is my desire to say in ten sentences what everyone else says in a whole book — what everyone else does not say in a whole book.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

Morning Lauds.

27 March.

Dear X.,

I slept soundly, with no dreams at all. Or maybe just one, now that I think about it. They say that you always dream, even if you cannot remember having done so. Reassuring, no? Everyone has dreams! Mine was something about walking — following or being followed — a peripatetic study of the spaces that open and close between two people.

In the middle of the night, around 3am, I heard the heavy front door bang closed. Who was it and where were they going? To look at the stars? Dominic is patron saint of the astronomers. Maybe those that here reside are inexplicably drawn — the glittering firmament and all. I have a strange misgiving that there is another person here with me. Watching. Waiting. As though all around me I can hear slight inhalations and exhalations — but when I turn to look, there is nothing, and no one.

You always said that I was too paranoid, that I should learn to see and accept things as they are. But how *are* things, other than as we — as I, as one — sees them? Matthew Arnold, and Emmanuel Kant before him, defined criticism as 'a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in this world'; it is by this studied and objective distance that we learn 'to see the object as in itself it really is'.[189] But I have always preferred Oscar Wilde's rebuttal.

Criticism's most perfect form…is in its essence purely subjective, and seeks to reveal its own secret and not the secret of another. For the highest Criticism deals with art not as expressive but as impressive purely…Beauty has as many meanings as man has moods. Beauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing. When it shows us itself, it shows us the whole fiery-coloured world…The highest Criticism, then, is more creative than creation, and the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not.[190]

The essay seeks not to explain the world in general, but the world in particular: idiosyncratic, idolatrous. The essay essays in order that we might compare not how similar, but how different our conclusions — thereby we flourish, we expand. Growth

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189 Matthew Arnold, 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time', in *Essays in Criticism* (London and Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1865), p.37.

190 Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist (1891)', in *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Prose, 1832-1901* (Calgary, CA: Broadview Press, 2012), p.268-270.

and evolution, it must be pointed out, are more stable and natural organic processes than stasis and torpor. Of course they require energy, but just the basics: light, water, oxygen.

Today, I woke with the sun — it glowed bright orange through the simple red curtain hung in the window of my cell, suffusing the room with a burnt, muffled light. I reached my hand up to touch the wall next to the bed, running my palm along it, feeling its deliberate crudeness: a plain, white plaster with a grainy, uneven surface. Apparently Le Corbusier intended these walls to pick up the light in a manner that would reflect the activity taking place within the cell: the occupant's mind in contemplation of his vows — poverty, chastity, charity, and faith. In the sun's morning angle, I could see every tiny nuance and gradation — it seemed rich to me — *now more than ever seems it rich to die.*[191] I lay there burnished by the sun and savoured the feeling of being far, far away from everything, as though a force was pushing me deep into solitude, towards the centre of myself. *You may feel alone*, the essay says, hissing with relish, but you must learn to bear this, you must go down and in to come out and up up up.

I have read many conflicting accounts of this building, and also of Le Corbusier's larger oeuvre. It's difficult to say what is real or has anything to do with the architect's actual intentions. Such is the force of mythological figures: people project personal meanings upon their work, use them as archetypes, illustrations, validations, reinforcements of other values that may or may not have any relation. Somehow I had expected books about architecture to be less subjective. It was the affinity with maths and science: I assumed that interpretations would be based on something solid — fact, history, geometry, *proofs*. Stable things that could be measured. But, by all accounts — all accounts are just as faulty, tinged with the personal as interpretations of any other creative discipline. Moreover, the messianic tones are unmistakeable. People worship Le Corbusier, and this place, disciples of: Architecture, Engineering, Faith, Religion, the Monastic, Modernism, etc. Sometimes all of the above, mixed together in a potent and delirious cocktail of veneration.

And so I will begin my own interpretation, my own representation of Le Couvent de Sainte-Marie de la Tourette. *To see the object as in itself it really is not.*

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191 John Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale', in *Keats: Selected Poems and Letters* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1995), p.188.

I stand up from my chair with a monstrous effort, but I have the impression that I carry it with me and that it's heavier, for it's the chair of subjectivity.[192]

It took me some time to rise from bed. I felt rested, but it was as though a heavy weight lay across my chest. A simple, iron cross — or maybe one of those devotional medals that depict one's patron saint. Or an anthology, a collection — something cumbersome and exhaustive. You get used to the weight after a while, the extra exertion it takes for the breath to rise and fall. Today I think of it as a book of pressed flowers, each one a saying, an aphorism — bare, long-stemmed offerings: *Calendula, Nasturtium, Lavandula, Borago, Helleborus*. Chosen carefully for their healing properties.

Or maybe the weight is simply the strangeness of corporeal being: at moments you are seized by the gravity of it all. Limbs and organs, skin and bones. Hearts, valves, veins.

Yesterday I kept banging into everything. The cell seemed so narrow, I must have clipped my right shoulder at least 5 or 6 times on the wooden shelving unit that separates the sink from the bed. And yet today, the proportions of the space seem more accommodating. As though I absorbed some of their logic overnight while I slept: my brain reached out to calculate the precise widths and diameters, adjusting my machinations, the logic and measurements of my body to fit within them. The building is scaled to Le Corbusier's Modulor: the height of a man with his arms raised. Initially 1.75m, based on a French man, it was eventually amended to 1.83m, apparently because 'in English detective novels, the good-look men, such as policemen, are always six feet tall'.[193] With his arms raised, this tall drink of water reaches 2.262m. Set in stone here and elsewhere in Le Corbusier's work.

Perhaps I found the space physically jarring because the Modulor literally leaves no place for a woman's body — no notion of female harmony and what such a sequence of measurements might produce. I measured my body against all of the lengths and widths to see where and how it fell short, didn't quite meet: a kind of enforced shrinking, Alice in Le Corbusier land. Of course, the convent was created for a community of men, in which women were resolutely prohibited. But what happens now? Do I become one of

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192 Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.137.

193 Le Corbusier, *The Modulor: A Harmonious Model to the Human Scale, Universally Applicable to Architecture and Mechanics,* trans. by Peter de Francia and Anna Bostock, 1 (Paris: Fondation Le Corbusier, 2004), p.56.

them, the longer I stay? Not a man, but an ideal-sized, a well-proportioned human with only the best, the noblest of intentions embedded deep within, radiating from the centre of my bones, their soft, honest marrow?

We grow accustomed to the outlines, the confines we are given. Within which we are placed; within which we live. We may even come to resemble them in shape and form. This is why freedom is contingent upon recognising that nothing which surrounds you is naturally occurring: everything is a construction, an edifice, a façade.

It's strange to find yourself inhabititing a space that cares for you so little — in which you feel, your hear, distinctly, *you do not belong.*

Sometimes, this is what the essay feels like. Not my wild woman, the lone-rider, but that *other* essay — the canon: the room full of old men with their multiple volumes, the words and the ways that have come to define a particular variety of literary wisdom, thereby rendering it constitutionally unattainable for me. *But but — my voice doesn't sound like that.* They laugh when I try to say hello — they speak over me and drown me out as I mumble and stutter, barely able to utter a word. I consult my notes, but see, see here — *A quick ear and eye, an ability to discern the infinite suggestiveness of common things, a brooding meditative spirit, are all that the essayist requires to start business with.*[194] Ha — HA — they scoff as I stand there clutching my papers: *you don't know, little girl, you don't see the world as it is, only as what it is not, and always through the filter of your foolish, wayward self. You, you don't know anything at all.*

Do I even care to disagree? Can I pretend this isn't precisely the argument I have with myself every time I sit down to write?

It's the building, too, that is confusing — contains a number of paradoxes. I know that it is populated by a community and yet I see no one. I hear people walking down the halls — speaking, singing, chanting — but where, and who?

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194 Alexander Smith, 'On the Writing of Essays', in *Dreamthorp: A Book of Essays Written in the Country* (London: Strahan & Co., 1863), p.25.

Yesterday, the woman who showed me to my room said that I was *welcome* — that this place is my home. I was so tired and hungry that I swelled with gratitude at the very idea. And yet, yesterday evening as I walked the building, I encountered only barriers. Many of the 'communal' spaces are locked: the library, the study rooms, the kitchen, the upper floors and stairwells of the west wing. Even the church was locked! Maybe it was just for the evening, and it would have been fearfully dark inside at that time of day in any case. Pushing against the entrance with all of my weight, I had to laugh — faith — the huge immoveable door — it wouldn't open for me! But I felt a little embarrassed, and I worried about being caught. Caught doing what? Not belonging? Whose voice is it that I heard all of the time: *don't make any noise, don't take up too much space, you are not one of us, you may be asked to leave at any moment*. By that point I was too nervous to try the door of the chapter room, in which the friars pray together at various times of day — Morning Lauds (7am) and Vespers (6pm). I don't want to intrude or imply a lack of regard for the way of life practiced here — whether I belong, whether I believe it or not.

Thought, the mind, the labyrinth of the self can be seen as a complex spatial form. As such, it seems funny and fitting: *I cannot access the entirety of the structure.*

Thought should grasp its own impossibility for the sake of possibility….the logic of an object's aporias, the impasse contained within the task itself.[195]

I sit in the refectory, as I write this to you. I can hear the friars in the chapter room next door, chanting the Morning Lauds. Traditionally said following the Night Office, just after dawn, these are prayers that welcome the day with gratitude: psalms of praise, jubilation, thanks, and devotion for the bounty of the earth and for individual life and existence. Famously, St. Rose of Lima used to wake every morning and go to her hermitage in the garden, exclaiming: 'Trees, plants, grasses and flowers, bless your Creator!' The lord was so pleased that he animated the creatures into movement, giving them motion to express what their voices had to say — the trees interlocked their boughs and the shrubs inclined their branches to the earth, as though bowing in gratitude, gracefully bending their limbs in welcome.[196]

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195 Theodor Adorno, as cited in Gerhard Richter, 'Afterness and Aesthetics: End Without End', *figures of following and thought in modern aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p.32.

196 Ferdinand Donatien Joret, 'The Sequence of the Hours', *Dominican Life* (London: Blackfriars Publications, 1958), p.169.

While I would prefer the branches of the trees outside to remain reaching to the sky, rather than bowed — women with their arms raised, many metres high — I can appreciate the idea of a catalogue of faith, the list as a means of giving thanks. The collection, the compendium. The idea that obsessionality could be a form of company. Like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his *Flora Petrinsularis*: 'They say a German did a book about a lemon peel; I would have done one about each stalk of hay in the meadows, each moss in the woods, each lichen that covers the rocks; in short, I did not want to leave a blade of grass or a plant particle which was not amply described.'[197] The cataloguing was in part a way to pass the time, banned form Paris and sequestered on his island. But he also refers to it as 'a noble plan'. The deep and mysterious happiness of detailing the names and orders of the world.

A list as a concealed essay, fugitive fragments pressed between parchment. As Foucault writes of Borges' Chinese Encyclopaedia, a taxonomy can do as much to break up 'all of the ordered surfaces and all the places with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things' as to confirm it. Any list, any catalogue, is a system of thought that reveals 'the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*'.[198] See into my brain, my heart, my wunderkammer. And what will you do with all of the things you have collected? See what I hold here, what I wish to praise daily. Like James Schuyler's poem, in which the speaker gathers from a field one of each kind of plant to study before they wilt: *I salute that various field.*[199]

But enough of this. I am no poet. And I promised that I would write to you about this place, the History — L'Histoire — *the story of.*

And so —
Le Couvent da la Tourette. Southwest of Lyon, 30 minutes on the train. Referred to by locals as Le Couvent d'Eveux, which is the name of the tiny village outside of which it sits. In 1954, Père Marie-Alain Couturier approached Le Corbusier to see if he might be interested in a commission to build a centre of study and worship for the Provincial Dominican Council of the Lyons region. Couturier had a great deal of influence and

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197 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1992), p.65.

198 Michel Foucault, 'Preface', in *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.xvi.

199 James Schuyler, 'Salute', in *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*, ed. by Donald M. Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1960), p.220.

vision at the time, with regards to the potential revival of religious art in France. Couturier believed the aesthetics and architectures of Faith could benefit from working closely with accomplished artists to generate evolved and inspiring surroundings within which to learn, work, pray, and worship.[200] He commissioned Henri Matisse, Georges Rouault, Fernand Léger, and Jacques Lipchitz to work on the churches of Vence, Assy, and Audincourt. In 1954, he approached Le Corbusier to build the Chappelle Notre-Dame-du-Haut at Ronchamp.

Le Corbusier, though a resolute atheist, had long expressed an interest in the monastic, both ideologically and architecturally. Many times he had visited the Charterhouse at Ema — the Certosa di Val d'Ema, a 14th century Carthusian convent in the Tuscan hills, just outside of Florence. He referred to it as a 'Modern City', a 'radiant vision' that illustrated an essential and profound lesson: 'Here the equation which it is the task of the human wit to solve, the reconciliation of "individual" on the one hand and "collectivity" on the other, lay resolved.'[201]

I suppose he means resolved in that the two are seamlessly linked and integrated. The individual and the communal, the different needs of each, as well as their relationship to one another. At Ema, Le Corbusier saw the possibility of building a single place that could provide for all of man's needs — a negotiation of that which he requires to exist in harmony with himself and with his external environment, both natural and constructed. While this interest is evident in Le Corbusier's non-secular projects — the complex at Chandigarh, the Unités, his early housing developments — the notion of dialectic tension was more crucial at La Tourette. The negotiation of interior and exterior, individual and collective, public and private was to be embedded within the form, the structure, and the content of the building.

That is to say, La Tourette was designed to both reflect and facilitate the Dominican life, routines, and ethos. The Dominicans are a preaching order, established sometime in the

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200 Couturier was co-editor of a journal called *Art Sacré* that functioned as a vehicle for reformist opinions about Church art, and in which he wrote, 'It would of course be ideal if Christian art could be revived by men who are both geniuses and saints. However, if such men do not exist, we believe that it would be much safer in the present circumstances to commission geniuses with no faith to bring about this renaissance, this resurrection, rather than believers with no talent.' Philip Potié, *Le Corbusier: Le Couvent Sainte-Marie de La Tourette* (Paris: Fondation Le Corbusier; Basel: Birkhäuser, 2001), p.60.

201 Le Corbusier, as cited in 'Le Corbusier's Monastic Ideal', in Nathaniel Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2005), p.119-120

13th century by St. Dominic, a Spanish man from Castile. Traditionally, the order operated in heavily populated urban centres, often within universities, colleges, schools — places of learning and debate — in which members would participate in discussions about theology, philosophy, and the practice of faith. As such, there are no Dominican monasteries — it is an open versus a closed order. In the early 20th century, ideological debates in France separated church from state, and the Dominicans found themselves — though still a preaching order — exiled to more rural locations. They had to build their own centres of learning and worship, which now functioned as self-contained, religious outposts. From the 1960s onwards, Dominicans have returned to work in urban spaces, which are considered the ideal place to negotiate the balance between asceticism and activism.

Le Couvent de la Tourette was built as a seminary at which young Dominicans would come to learn and become experts in their faith, studying for seven years in total before returning to a city or community elsewhere.

The order is shaped by a perpetual attempt to invent a middle way between the certitude of hermetic contemplation and the confusion of worldly experience. This accounts for the layout of the building, the foundations of the architectural vision. Each pupil, teacher, friar, etc. has a cell that is entirely private, in which he studies, engages in mediation or prayer, and sleeps. Almost all other activity is communal: there is a common room, a refectory, a library, a chapter room, meeting rooms, and the church. For private prayer outside of one's room, undisturbed, there is the oratory, as well as the crypt — a lower level to the church that houses five private altars. The bathrooms are communal, as are the hallways that link all of the cells on the upper two floors of the building.

Each day involves prayers and practices that strive for a balance between monastic clarity and apostolic purpose[202] — a continuous reinvention of the balance between conflicting forces — one moves back and forth throughout the day: individual to collective, interior to exterior, private to public.

Tell me about it.

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202 Joret, p.175.

You don't need to be religious to understand the oscillation, the trauma and the necessity of the boundary, the border, and its continual crossing. As Le Corbusier wrote while construction of the convent was underway, 'the plan embraces valid ritual, marking the spiritual and moral gestures and attitudes of the human mind — a fitting theme for the Modulor; and so forth'.[203]

It seems like an awful lot of thresholds, doesn't it? Crossing, always crossing back and forth, like Charon on the river Styx — ushering selves from one world to the other. A tiny death, a tiny birth each time. And what helps us to understand the status of interior life more than valid rituals, finding means to mark the attitudes of the human mind?

I wanted to write about Xenakis today, too. But I have run out of time. The friars and some day guests begin to shuffle into the refectory and the quiet spell of the morning is broken.

I'm not finished here, with this correspondence, but I begin to feel that time is about to go on without me. The weight of time, its strange caprice: rotating limbs and staring glaring numbers, abstractions and tautologies, a rule of iron arms and fists. Sometimes I wonder if it just wants an offering in return for all of its vigilance: some dreams, perhaps, or a small token. A few prayers, a medallion, signs of devotion.

And so I offer this: every piece of writing, every correspondence is both a staving off and a commemoration of time — structures of appeal and avoidance. And so add this to the stack now. Some prayers and devotions. A few seconds, maybe, or minutes. A day or two, at most. A book of hours.

I hope you are well, at whatever time, whatever threshold you are crossing.

Yours truly,
Emily

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203 Le Corbusier, *The Modulor*, p.320.

The Book of Hours.

It begins with the writing, always the writing.
The second, the minute, the hour, the morning, the day. The time. The life.

Time is not made to be known, but lived; to examine, to explore time is to debase it, to transform it into an object. He who does so will ultimately treat himself the same way… In an explained universe, nothing would still have meaning except madness itself. A thing we have encompassed no longer counts.[204]

The Book of Hours is blue. It is red and yellow and green on green — and blue on blue on BLUE above and over all other colours over all other senses over all other books and skies, open and closed. The Book of Hours has gold detail that is so intricate and careful and precise that it might break your heart if you looked too closely — so try not to, try not to — look and/or heartbreak — imagining the tiny ministrations required to produce it. So like those of the heart, they are, slight and hopeful, ardent tendrils, flushed with the excitement of faith. Rosy-cheeked novices — new pledges — new orders. On some pages, only a few, the gold is the most prominent hue. Fine, elegant tracery, filigree. And on these pages you may look — may stare — stare at stare in the face in the eye for as long as you like and ask why and whom and from whence this beauty. It is possible, though perhaps not advisable, to expect an answer.

Here, the room is long, with sets of windows on either side — divisible into roughly four sections each. The more striking windows are on the exterior face of the building, looking out to the hills and trees that range and reach, slope and copse beyond. Vertical panes that stretch ceiling to floor. Varying in width, the windows are separated by thin seams of cement. Or punctuated, you might say — *punctuated.* As though the glass stretches across the room in a single pane, unbroken, like a wall — a wash of time, or sound — and the thin striations of cement are points along it. Moments, events, indications, live wires radiating from floor to ceiling. Pause, emphasis, accent — hit the note harder — make it sound — *staccato* — make it mean — *tenuto.*

Here, where I sit. Here, where I write.

Here.

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204 E.M. Cioran, *The Fall Into Time* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), p.177.

You see, there is a *here* and there is a *there*. A different distinction, to be clear, than saying here is here and there is there — which seems simply to mean that there are different places, that places are different, in a general sort of way. What *I* mean is that *here* is where I — where you, where we — exist. And *there* is that other place. That place that is *not* here — defined by its never-being-here-ness. The there that I cannot get to because I am always *here*. The sense of there that leads me to believe *there* is something else — elevations, spheres, orbs, existences, planes — parallel, oblique, intersecting.

I once thought I *was* there.

Or on my way, getting close, at least — *going*. It was early on a Sunday morning. I was alone in a foreign city. It was grey and ugly, the city and the weather alike, and I had walked a long distance, following a canal from my hotel near the train station to the centre of the city, close to the old harbour front. I sat in a coffee shop reading *The New Yorker*, a story about a boy who had a life embedded with moments that burst into beautiful pieces of meaning — crystallised, refracted, incandescent: everything shimmered, everything connected. In between bits of reading, I wrote in my notebook. Meandering thoughts, observed details, eavesdroppings — real and imagined. The sun shone through the window, a moment of illumination, and my attention was drawn outside. I looked out at the cobbled square just past the window and noticed a clock — free-standing, as you often see in such places. Keepers of public time. As I regarded the face of the clock, its minute hand began to move — slowly and then rapidly — around and around — so that minutes, quarter, half and then full hours were suddenly passing with great speed. An hour every five seconds. I stared and stared, blinked, rubbed my eyes and looked around in amazement to see if anyone else had noticed what was happening — what passed, what *elapsed* — and did they also wonder where we were going and when we would arrive and in what time. Was this clock on a scale time that corresponded to a different world in which its passage functioned differently? Faster, slower, dissolved, infinite? But no one seemed to register anything at all: it was just a day like any other. After 12 complete revolutions, 12 hours in roughly 60 seconds, the minute hand stopped on exactly the time at which it had begun to spin. Or — to be precise — one minute, 60 seconds later: 9.46am. I noticed that the sun had gone.

A few hours later, on my way to the airport, I sat in the cab wondering if I had imagined it entirely, this golden, spinning moment. Alone and a stranger here, I had no one with

whom to confer, and I felt that it would forever remain a mystery. I looked out the window and saw a flash of bright pink in the otherwise dull green landscape. It was a flock of flamingos, and in between the rosy flushes were stabs of deeper red — scarlet ibis. Again, I blinked again and again. Moments later, I passed a sign that said: 'Diergaarde Blijdorp Rotterdam' – Rotterdam Zoo.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Always taking notes, I wrote it down carefully in my book. I wrote it down as though its existence there within those pages, its acknowledgement in words on paper, was assurance of its veracity. That I had not imaged it — anything — everything.

Boredom is time itself as 'bewitching'. This spell holds us at a distance from ourselves: first from our own possibilities (of action, of thinking), which are given, but unattractive and powerless, and then, at a distance from our past and future, and finally from time itself, which changes from familiar to strange, slightly uncanny.[205]

The Book of Hours. Les Très Riches Heures. The rich hours. The royal hours. The 'royal ours'. Which is to say, mine. The blue hours, and the golden hours too — the shining moments that contain all of the secret colours that we cannot see. The hours where people like you and me spend time — spend eternities — looking, scrutinizing, magnifying glass up-close, nose-pressed, heavy-breathing, steamy panes. The Book of Hours, what is the progression of its colours? Blue, cerulean, verdigris — to orange, to yellow, to gold, to copper, to crimson — to blue — again blue — blue again— azure, deepening into lapis, palatinate, cobalt, ultramarine, zaffre — with an honourable mention to International Klein Blue, and to Prussian blue, which is almost black.

But what happens when the light has not yet arrived — *the dearly departed*? What happens in the dead hours in which light does not move anywhere that we can see, its arc hidden from our traces and projections. When the light doesn't move, but instead lies like a corpse and drags like the Dredgeman, leaving long low trails across the ground — ditches, trenches, graves. Yes, the black hours — obsidian — *her blacks crackle and drag*[206] — in which time slows and extends its beats, muffled, velvet percussion. Colours do exist in the black hours, though they may appear different. For instance, when I scream it

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205 Martin Heidegger, as paraphrased in Michael Haar, 'Empty Time and Indifference to Being', *Heidegger toward the Turn: Essays on the Work of the 1930s*, ed. by James Risser, (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1999), p.305.
206 Sylvia Plath, 'Edge', in *Ariel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), p.85.

is a scarlet scream, it is a verdant wail, it is a jaundiced shriek. In the black hours, all of the sounds and colours overlap and combine — dark, inscrutable ritual.

The Book of Hours holds all hours, for better and for worse. In sickness and in health. For richer and for poorer. Les très pauvres heures, aussi. Though it must be noted that all are rich in detail.

Here, I can hear the friars chanting next door in the chapter room — sweet, low, even tones. To say dulcet would be too much, but it is soothing — the pattern, the rhythm. Here, there are eight tables, for eating, and, at the far end of the room from the entrance, a small kitchen. The ceiling beams and the columns that divide the room are of unfinished, pre-stressed concrete — rough and solid, seams visible — like trees with their internal rings of time turned upside down and inside out, for all to see. Permanently felled, they stand. It is a communal place, a shared space. You can see from the roster by the bread basket that sits on a long, low table near the kitchen — a list of names, 9 men, with boxes to tick which meals each has attended. There are hardly any checkmarks! Do they not eat, the friars? Or do they eat alone? There has only been one very old man who this morning shuffled through the room slowly, from one end to other, and then disappeared — 'Bonjour', he grunted, with some difficulty.

Here, where you don't have to go anywhere, because you are already *there*, the only there that there is when you are already *here and there* because there is nowhere else. Freedom and confinement in pendulous volumes. ***Inclusum labor illustrat****; it is because I am enclosed that I work and glow with all my desire.*[207]

Here, where I sit. Here, where I write.

Here.

I acknowledge each attempt at writing as a bona fide stab in the dark. The only consolation to know that I have passed some more time — that I have some more time under my belt, yes — sometimes I begin, even, to feel a little thick around the waist.

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207 Roland Barthes, 'Leaving the Movie Theater', in *The Art of the Personal Essay*, ed. by Philip Lopate (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), p.419.

Time, how it warps and frays. Ceaselessly torn as each minute of the day passes, and with each tick each tock I struggle more with how *to* pass it. What to fit in and how and in what order — things shift and swim around, rearranging themselves in multiple combinations, and each combination runs down a running list so long that finally I can't see the beginning — *any longer* — and forget what it was I actually wanted to do in the first place, and I just sit and sit as the paper rolls and scrolls away from me, words and plans and hopes and ideas unstarted and unfinished, shining into the distance without me.

These are the black hours. When you don't start to move soon enough, don't leave the house in time and it sucks you in — the house, time, The Dredgeman. The Dredgeman gets his pole stuck in you, right in the centre of your heart, and you can't move — paralysed, pinned to the ground, in the muck, in the mud, where you sit stand lie. And there is a terrible feeling that all around you everything is moving and you remain frozen as it passes and that it might be like this forever, for always. A terrible feeling that nothing matters — the books, the papers stacked neatly on the desk, words upon words. All of the things that you love — they burn to ash in the hot paused air, and in your throat, cinder and coal.

How often should I expect these moments to come for me?

Further than the skin. The bride and her bachelors. Stripped bare. Even.

The even, I now understand, is the most interesting part of that title.

Even then.

now.

when.

how.

before.

after.

during.

Even.

Meted.

Even.

(Steven).

Even.

Pause.

Breathe.

Even.

Gasp.

Help.

Her.

Please.

Even.

It is in these moments — the dark hours, the eventides with their obsidian songs — that the pause explodes and burns you. Fixes your image like an atomic shadow, and all of the hours rush in. The hours upon hours upon hours upon hours.

Yours. Mine. Ours.

Time passes me, out of my hands, through my fingers, and their sorry, wincing prints. Smudges left behind on the glass that reveal just how hard I was pressing against it, trying to reach a better view. And the light passes me, too, imprinted. Talbot type, cyanotype, the isometric white ghosting shape begins to emerge and take form. What will I look like in the portrait that remains, fashioned by such ephemerality. What angles and curves will the light catch and preserve? What grey and shadow and deepest blacks. What silver mirrorings. The image should be clear, I have been sitting here so still, for so long.

Space by itself, and time by itself, are doomed to fade away into mere shadows, and only a kind of union of the two will preserve an independent reality.[208]

The Book of Hours repeats. Months and seasons, the activities that accompany them.

A year of patterns, prayers, cycles, charts, timelines, wheels, weather, migrations, harvests. The Book of Hours begins and ends, repeats and cycles until its time becomes

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208 Hermann Minkowski, as cited in Adrian Bardon, *A Brief History of the Philosophy of Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.69.

our time, becomes timelessness. Neutral and charged, empty and fraught with meaning all at once. We understand ourselves — we live and die — by its faces, arms, and hands.

Here, there are sets of emerald green curtains pulled open so that the windows are unobscured. So that you can look straight out — views, glimpses, slivers of what lies beyond, the sound between the pause, the world between its occlusions. A sliver of this, a sliver of that. A sapling, a maple, an oak, an elm, a poplar, a beech, a dark cherry tree. A willow, a wallow, a swallow — or 4, in the air, frozen for a moment, like different elapses of the same bird — in 4/4 time.

Here, the elastic value of the musical beat is combined with architecture's struggle for the window. For the light, for the shadow — the height, the volume, the width — the feeling of space, both enclosed and expansive. Or is it density.

Or is it duration.

I went to a concert once. It was 5 hours long, a torrent of music driven by a single theme — *Music in 12 Parts*. The piano that carried the refrain, a deluge of notes repeating over and over, with changes so slight and slow that they were nearly imperceptible. The pianist, who was also the composer, was famous, and I sat in the cheap seats with all of the other idiots who thought that if they showed up and stayed and listened very carefully, for 5 hours straight, that something would happen, would be revealed: that they might change — slowly, imperceptibly, and then all of a sudden, leave a new person, enlightened. Which is the wager, I suppose. Music as a gradual process.

Something *did* happen. To me, at least. I welled with gratitude for the pianist composer, whose music had provided a soundtrack to my life, and my writing in it, for as long as I could remember. I remembered my crazy piano teacher, Ms. Element, and her punishing belief in my ability — ultimately a disappointment. I thought about the other famous Minimalist musicians. Especially the one who grew up in a tiny cabin on the prairies; who heard the wind as though it was its own solid entity; who came to love the drone and to replicate it; who made spaces full of pink light and one piano, a piece that lasted forever — like a precious, encrusted jewel. And he prayed, before each performance, that he might deserve such richness. In the concert hall, the music repeated and dredged forth memories, exhalations shaped with quivering, exhausted effort. Their unrequited details striking chords deep within. I thought of the book with the character who watches the

second hand of the ticking clock so closely that he can see seconds within seconds, the infinitesimal ticking of the tocking. Or the other book, with the character who cries over Zeno's paradox, the tragedy of fractions.

The music repeated like a prayer, like a rosary, and I was ceaselessly borne upon its eddying tides. In its intervals, I felt myself expand and increase like it was an organism — a healthy virus — and I could see that *I* was an organism — and I could also see that I did not exist at all. And that, conversely, I existed absolutely, infinitely. *There* — in the fourth dimension — were space and time, for a moment united. *There* is where the other things live — memory, time without its name, all of the entrances and exits, the thresholds of the world.

In this short life that only lasts an hour merely how much – how little – is within our power –[209]

It ends with the writing, always the writing. The second, the minute, the hour, the morning, the day. The time. The life.

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209 Emily Dickinson, 'In this short life [envelope poem]', in Marta Werner and Jen Bervin, *The Gorgeous Nothings* (New York: New Directions; Christine Burgin, 2013), p.62-63.

Tell all the truth but tell it slant –

Emily Dickinson, 'Tell all the truth but tell it slant'

The Little Day Hours.

28 March.

Dear X.,

I have been thinking about Emily Dickinson:

This is the Hour of Lead —
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow —
First — Chill — then Stupor — then the letting go —[210]

I first read that piece when someone gave me, for my birthday, a copy of the selected poems. At the time I made that easy, obvious error of judging a book by its cover: light blue dust-jacket with swirling, girling script, and a stock image drawing of a rose. Why ought I to care about this Emily Dickinson person, I thought — simply because we have the same name? Years later, I read her again and understood — many things. The glib folly of youth, the sacred dignity of sharing words and a name. Years later, and I bear allegiance to all of the Emilys that came before — sisters in arms, in pens! — Dickinson, Brontë, Carr — as though they lend me some kind of force or legitimacy. As though without them, solitary mistresses, I would be lost.

A ma femme. A mes femmes. A dedication.

Benedicte. Patria mia. Meus Deus.

And so today, my birthday, I return to Dickinson. Her strange majuscules. The capital S of Snow that aches like ice against teeth. On the jacket copy of that first pale blue book, a critic noted the 'curious energy' of Dickinson's work. Where did it come from? Some deep internal force, a profound, gently quivering thing — pushed to greater intensity and expression by her solitude, the sweet succour of aloneness? Or maybe this is just how *I* feel about the curious energy of writing. Maybe it's easier to think that someone else is, was the same way. Maybe it sweetens the aloneness, causes its enclosure to shine with

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210 Emily Dickinson, 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes', in *Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries*, ed. by Helen Vendler (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p.168.

radical possibility. Here, inside, is everything you need, and more. Quotation is the ultimate form of devotion. If you say the words often and with enough force, you can slide right inside of them.

And so, today, I am thirty years old. I don't really know why I'm here. Is it too much, too melodramatic to say *here on earth*? I have always had difficulty imaginging the future — *the hour of lead* — so it often seems not to exist, and age comes as a surprise.

The unity of each essay is a unity achieved by the speaker for his audience as well as for himself, a kind of reassociation of his sensiblity and theirs.[211]

By here, I also mean at this convent in the hills, in France, alone. Seul. Solitaire.

My visit has been full of joy, but also deep frustration. As with any writing project, there is the question of how to form a meaningful representation — what will you focus on, include, exclude: how will you achieve a kind of unity? I had planned to do a piece of writing each day — linguistic incarnations of the different spaces here. Instead, I find myself jotting down all of the odd reminiscences — fragments and anecdotes, images and sequences — that arise unpredictably, as so often happens in a new environment. And, of course, there is the essay — always the essay. I am possessed, obsessed with the question of structure: how the puzzle pieces fit together, how the bodies of information interlock to make sense, what kind of tension is required.

The 18th century British essayists advocate for a kind of libertarian insouciance. Samuel Johnson writes, 'The writer of essays escapes many embarrassments to which a larger work would have exposed him; he seldom harasses his reason with long trains of consequences, dims his eyes with the perusal of antiquated volumes, or burthens his memory with great accumulations of preparatory knowledge.'[212] For Johnson, a 'careless glance' or a 'transient survey' is enough to inspire an essay: once given over to the matters of the mind, it is 'expanded into flowers, and sometimes ripened into fruit'.[213] Joseph Addison, alike, wrote, 'It is sufficient that I have several thoughts on a subject,

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211 William Gass, 'Emerson and the Essay', in *Habitations of the Word* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), p. 35.

212 Samuel Johnson, 'The Rambler, no. 184, Saturday, December 21, 1751', in *The Works of Samuel Johnson, with Murphy's essay*, ed. by R. Lynam, 2 (London: George Cowie and Co., 1825), p. 281.

213 Ibid.

without troubling myself to range them in such order, that they may seem to grow out of one another, and be disposed under their proper heads.'[214]

So what are the requirements then: to know very little about a great many things? If you are an essayist, you are an expert in…what, exactly? And yet, just because the essayist is 'a chartered libertine, and a law unto himself'[215] doesn't mean that it's a free-for-all. To write an essay is to find a structure in which you can collect and preserve the movement of your mind — *while it is still moving*. You must capture the stride while allowing it to carry on uninhibited. If you pin it down too closely, it will be thought *constrained* — it will squirm and sigh, dissent and give you the stink-eye.

The kind of insight that arrives with the essay: to what province of knowledge does it belong? No — that's a foolish question. For every form claims a stake in human experience. It is the mode of expression that accounts for difference in expertise, discipline, genre. In fact, it is these categories that the essay resists: the tendency to cop to what makes things solid. Turn words into a story, a novel, an article, a poem, an argument, a thesis, a *PhD*, etc. The essay wants all and none of these conventions. She uses them as far as they are necessary and stop shorts when tired or bored. She goes for dinner with certainty and, in the middle of the night, sneaks off to meet contradiction. The essay is polyamorous! She thinks it's important for all forms to feel equally loved. We do not all experience pleasure in the same way. This is a kind of tension, a dispersion: how thin, how wide can you stretch yourself, your mind, and still hold it together? Fidelity — a dangerous and exhilarating game.

Or, as Xenakis wanted to know, what are the causal chains through or by which we find intimate connections?

Xenakis, who I catch glimpses of everywhere in this building. The 'undulating' glass panes in the refectory, and in the cloisters where they coalesce at the centre, the atrium. The atrium, where the roof is raised in a pyramid — the culmination of pure geometry,

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214 Joseph Addison, 'The Spectator, no. 477', in *The Works of Joseph Addison*, 3 volumes (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1842), I, p. 227.

215 Alexander Smith, 'On the Writing of Essays', in *Dreamthorp: A Book of Essays Written in the Country* (London: Strahan & Co., 1863) p. 25.

the series of calculations that generate the windows, driving their rhythms to a central point: the climax — the pure moment.

In the architectural sketches behind La Tourette, you can sees some of Xenakis' calculations: the red and blue sections of the Modulor have been combined with the elements of the Golden Section in order to determine the widths of the windows.
A discrete number of variables determined and ordered according to probability theory.
Arrangments and rearrangements scribbled across the pages and in the margins:

ABCD
ABDC
ACBD
ACDB
ADBC
ADCB
BCDA
BCAD
BDAC
BDCA
BACD
BADC

And on and on. You get the picture. Or do you? The inner-workings of the equations are difficult for me to understand. I can grasp at the surface, the basic concepts. I thought I might try to write a version of this sequence in sentences or in words, some kind of verbal variation. I spent hours staring at the series of numbers and letters, but each time I set my pen to paper, it was as though the white before me began to expand, stretching infinitely into the distance. Fractions of fractions, the heartbreak of Zeno's paradoxes: *things infinite in respect of divisibility*.[216] Too many rules and the words run away — skitter scatter skate across the surface and over the edge.

I wonder if Le Corbusier thought that Xenakis might be the 'New Pythagoras', the answer to his call of so many years before? When he approached the young engineer to

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216 Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.143.

work on La Tourette, he told him, 'I have a project that will suit you perfectly; it is pure geometry — a Dominican monastery'.[217] But what is pure geometry? And how can you be an architect or an engineer if you hold a fundamental disbelief in order? Or rather, in order without disorder, harmony without chaos — the Stochastic Process: *The laws of the passage from complete order to total disorder in a continuous or explosive manner.*[218]

Xenakis looked to mathematics for tools that would allow him to unite certainty and uncertainty, 'timelessness' and musical motion. To unify rather than to privilege one over the other; to embrace rather than to eliminate the tension between the two. This notion can be see as the genesis of his 'expanded scores' — formal music that, in graphic notation, explodes into the third dimension. We can hear its linear tendencies — the line, the wave — but we see that sound is much more than meets the ear. It courses with uncertainties, reaches out in all directions, turns back in on itself.

Much like the essay: dynamic form and structure rely on tension. Discursive thinking, dialogue, debate. The essay can be seen, first and foremost, as an argument with the self. It owes much to the dialectic method of Plato's *Dialogues*, a series of conversations structured in question and answer format. The dialogues, far from *providing* answers, frequently exhaust themselves, ending in inconclusion — the process of questioning itself having been the most important aspect.

It is essential that the form incites an interest in the sounds that can be heard.[219]

Sieves, combs, cloud points, arborescences, alchemies, wefts, Brownian movements. Symbolic, cosmic, and also sliding, like curves and obliques from space.[220] So many different shapes and structures, stretching in all dimensions — across language, media, material. Is this how we move between the seemingly disparate?

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217 Iannis Xenakis, 'The Monastery of La Tourette', in *Le Corbusier: the Garland essays*, ed. by Harold Allen Brooks (New York: Garland, 1987), p.143.

218 Iannis Xenakis, as cited in James Harley, *Xenakis: His Life in Music* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.12.

219 Iannis Xenakis, *Sound and the Visual Arts*, ed. by Jean-Yves Bosseur, trans. by Brian Holmes and Peter Carrier (Paris: Dis Voir, 1999), p.53.

220 'Sound emerges following a long process that has nothing to do with music. The numbers of the world are formulas , drawings, schemas, graphics. Sound will emerge from these sketches. A slow process of maturation. And these sounds will be neither notes, nor scales, nor rhythms, nor timbres.' Michel Tabachnik, *De la musique avant toute chose* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 2008), p.67-68.

We cover the mess, the mass, the heap with a net — we cast, we catch, we pin points, we connect — *imagined origins reduce the sounds of clash and contradiction.*[221] We generate structures that embody dialectics. We look to forms for meaning, and to meaning for forms, and we believe that this relationship tells us things we cannot grasp on our own. Shared concepts, metaphor as a kind of alchemy:

There are ideas and structures which can compare with each other on a higher plane…For example, masses of sound events or masses of visual events (the points which fall into line or vanish altogether) are similar from the point of view of their structure and their treatment. They can be treated in the same way and with the same principles if, of course, one takes into consideration the phenomena of time, etc. Which are not all easy to assimilate.[222]

I like the idea that forms carry with them fundamental properties. And so, the way we chose to do — say — frame — make — explain things possesses an inherent ideology. That your approach betrays your relationship to the subject or object at hand. How near, how far you stray, nonetheless tethered to that central point.

There is, then, the question of chance — how much, how little we allow to intervene — to stretch, to swell the orbital. Unlike many of his contemporaries who wrote 'open' scores of music in which players were encouraged to variously interpret what was on the page, Xenakis preferred complete compositional control. Everything was to be played *precisely* as written: each piece is a complete architecture, so to disrupt or alter even a small element would change the entire project, would violate its structural and foundational principles and cause it to crumble and come crashing down. Herein lies the essential pressure: chaos within a structure, freedom within a form. For instance: something can ricochet endlessly within a closed space — you can observe it, feel the heat in the room increase; but without confines, it quickly zooms out of reach, into the far distance, never to return.

Though I am poor at them, I find calculations compelling — the possibility of order — or a contained disorder, at the very least. For even the failure of a structure to encompass its object reveals a great deal about both sides of the. I wonder at the formal possibilities for language — could they ever be as expansive as Xenakis' scores, for instance. What would be the linguistic equivalent of Brownian movements, wefts, arborescences?

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221 William Gass, *On Being Blue* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1979), p.7.

222 Xenakis, *Sound and the Visual Arts,* p.51.

The commonplace is transformed into a labyrinth of non-objective abstractions. Abstractions are never transformed into the commonplace.[223]

Coordinates, correspondences, constellations. What are the points of language that flip and slip, show their soft underbellies, sighing scales? Where can you slit them open, belly to throat, so that all of their secrets spill out?

Do you remember — years ago I had the idea to write an essay about *variations*. I had been listening to a lot of classical music, and felt that I had somehow alit on a perfect alignment of composers' names and variations that could be arranged in alphabetical order. The logic seemed perfect to me, mathematical in its precision and certitude. But when I tried to explain it, the names all came out in a muddle — no rhyme or reason to the arrangement. I kept listing names, variations, suites — Elgar! Goldberg! Holst! Ives! Diabelli?! Enigma?!!!! You said that it didn't mean anything anyways — the alphabet, the words and letters lining up. But it makes all the different, in music at least, whether you play A or B or C D E F G. Sharp, flat, major, minor.

Even if it is meaningless, wordplay is important: it is a way into something, gives rise to thought. You manipulate, you masturbate the scale, the alphabet, the vocabulary — you rub, you push, you press against the structures that have been set in place. You don't have to *break* them: just get a little hot under the collar and hope for a moment of unexpected abandon. But be careful. If things get too loose and fast — *abstracted* — words become simply lines on a page, a drawing, a sketch: you could tell people it was still a language, but does it count if you're the only one who can read it?

One of the few things I know about writing is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time…give it, give it all, give it now. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes.[224]

And it's true: use it up, write it down, as soon as you have it — the thought, the idea, the coordinates. Pin them down on the map, on the staff, on the graph paper, and draw lines — draw lines loose and light and thick and dark and heavy and around in circles until you can see the shape of something emerge. This is how Xenakis worked. Sense the form, allow your mind to feel around for it, through your hand. We can pull these

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223 Robert Smithson, 'A short description of two mirrored structures, 1965', in *Robert Smithson, the Collected Writings*, ed. by Jack Flam (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1996), p.328.

224 Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), p.79.

threads down for a moment only; think you fasten them securely with a sketch and a 'do-it-later' note in your journal and you will return to find disappointment — a paper covered in immaterial smudges, a drawing faded beyond recognition, an image all but erased.

Because gravity is like that.
(He hangs and then falls).

Like the cross, or the +, or the X of the cloisters here — whatever you believe in that day — religion, language, maps, mathematics — choose a sign, pick a symbol, make a mark on the page.

Yesterday, after sitting in the refectory for some time, I decided to explore the grounds. On the way to the woods, I noticed a map that had marked on it a series of 'ruines', or ruins, though on my walk I could find none. Perhaps I mistook their locations. The trees are amazing. Along the way, I stopped a few times to lie on the ground and look up at the sky, the branches waving above, spring buds just beginning to emerge. It was so windy that it would be easy to think the trees were speaking to you. *Arborescences.* I tried to read — Simone Weil, *Letters to a Priest* — but each time I was overwhelmed by the sky so blue beyond my hands, that tears leaked out of the corners of my eyes in sympathy. As I knew it would, there are moments when the melancholy begins to sink in.

In the mind of the woman for whom no place was home, thought of an end to all flight was unbearable.[225]

And so I walked and walked, and recited pieces of the stories I have memorised — Donald Barthelme, Denis Johnson, Sylvia Plath, Alice Munro, Amy Hempel. The words coursed through the air around me, strains and strings. I thought of yelling but instead I whispered. I felt an immense relief, outside of the white walls and all of the concrete. I admire but I also tire of their rules. I think that if I knew I had to stay here at this convent forever, I would go mad, I would suffocate. But out in the green in the grass on the slopes, I breathed deeply and looked around at the blue cornflowers, the irises, the daffodils, and the poppies that seemed to mouth my name.

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225 Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), p.125.

I thought of the Arcadian tradition so deeply embedded within the essay form — particularly the American transcendentalists and Idealist philosophers: Emerson, Thoreau, E.B. White. Natural history as a mode of autobiography. Nature helps — the space, distance, clean vistas, clear horizons. But it is also the movement, the footfalls. I thought about Erik Satie, who used to walk miles each day, from Arceuil to Paris and back. John Cage speculates, 'the source of Satie's sense of musical beat — the possibility of variation within repetition, the effect of boredom on the organism — may be this endless walking back and forth the same landscape day after day.'[226] I thought of Kant, too, who apparently refused to walk with another person, as it would upset his breathing — in through the nose, out through the mouth — which he believed to be a source of intellectual strength. It takes all sorts of rituals, accidental and deliberate, to dredge it out, doesn't it.

I found a strange field, hard earthen furrows with newly sewn grass. I knelt down to feel the earth and found beneath it, everywhere just below the surface, hard white rocks, like quartz, and some quite large. How could you manage to grow anything there? And what do they do with all of this white stone? I took three and put them in my pocket.

Beyond the field and the strange grotto is a graveyard for the friars who spend their lives at the convent. Or at least those who end them here. Modest wooden crosses with awkwardly shaped white placards on which are written names, dates of birth and death, and the number of years in service to God. Some of them started when they were just boys, teenagers. I'm not sure whether to admire or to be terrified of such a belief in vocation. A calling. *I heard it calling.*

Wandering between the rows of crosses, I imagined that buried beneath were all of the people I wanted to be — various heteronyms, projected selves, who would never meet each other. I thought of Yorrick, *alas poor Yorrick!*[227] — and the notorious gravedigger, contemplator of skulls, amateur phrenologist. Do you know the story about the skull that André Tchaikowsky donated in 1982? *His* skull, that is, upon his decease was left to the Royal Shakespeare Company for use in productions of *Hamlet*. There were furious

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226 John Cage, as cited in Robert Orledge, *Satie the Composer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.18.

227 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (London: Scott, Webster, ad Geary, 1842), V.1.10.

debates about whether using a real skull diminishes the power of theatre and the 'complicity of illusion between actor and audience'.[228] David Tennant used it in Stratford, then stopped because the belief was that the realness of the skull distracted the audience from the play.

Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.
Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.[229]

It's funny, the variety of expectations about the quality of illusion demanded from Art. What is the line between something being too real or not real enough? What is in that uncanny valley between the naïve and the sentimental? *Memento mori. Nature mort.* Nature mort means dead life or dead nature, but it also means 'nature dies'.

Il mort. Elle mort. On mort. (Je mors. Tu mort.)

See — look here — I arranged some things for you, just a small tableau. Only, I've been standing here in the corner for so long that my arms begin to ache, holding this heavy wooden prop.

Scale. Proportion. Ratio. Sequence. Adagio. Largo. Presto. Vivace.
Prime. Terce. Sext. None. Eyes. Teeth. Hair. Fingernails.

Yours, with love and squalor,
Emily

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228 Pascale Aebischer, *Shakespeare's Violated Bodies: Stage and Screen Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.86.
229 T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), p.14.

Vexations (variations on a theme).

I hate movements that displace the lines.[230]

Scale. Proportion. Ratio. Sequence.
Scale. Proportion. Sequence. Ratio.
Scale. Ratio. Proportion. Sequence.
Scale. Ratio. Sequence. Proportion.
Scale. Sequence. Proportion. Ratio.
Scale. Sequence. Ratio. Proportion.

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Largo. Presto. Vivace. Adagio.
Largo. Presto. Adagio. Vivace.
Largo. Vivace. Adagio. Presto.
Largo. Vivace. Presto. Adagio.
Largo. Adagio. Presto. Vivace.
Largo. Adagio. Vivace. Presto.

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230 Marcel Broodthaers, *La Pluie (Project pour un texte)*, 1969, 16mm, black and white silent film, 2 minutes.

231 Guillaume Apollinaire, 'Il Pleut', in *Selected Poems: with parallel French text*, trans. by Martin Sorrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.142.

He began to warn the people. He said:
After a while it's gonna rain
After a while.
For forty days and
For forty nights.
And the people didn't believe him.
And they began to laugh at him.
And they began to mock him.
And they began to say: It ain't gonna rain![232]

Sext. None. Prime. Terce.
Sext. None. Terce. Prime.
Sext. Prime. Terce. None.
Sext. Prime. None. Terce.
Sext. Terce. Prime. None.
Sext. Terce. None. Prime.

It had been raining but
It had not been raining.[233]

Fingernails. Eyes. Teeth. Hair.
Fingernails. Eyes. Hair. Teeth.
Fingernails. Teeth. Eyes. Hair.
Fingernails. Teeth. Hair. Eyes.
Fingernails. Hair. Eyes. Teeth.
Fingernails. Hair. Teeth. Eyes.

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232 Steve Reich, 'It's Gonna Rain [Part 1]', *Early Works*, 1987 (Nonesuch, 9 79169-2, 1987)

233 John Ashbery, 'A Boy', in *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*, p.271.

No man ever took more delight in Springs, Woods, Groves, Garden Walks, Fishponds, &c. But

Thus Tantalus catches the waves

That fly his parched lips. (Horace)

And so do I: I may long: I may not have.[234]

The Ramble.

You escape! You escape the convent, where you have begun to feel trapped — confined, refined by its whiteness. A static, shackled, hampered version of yourself. The convent, where you have begun to imagine walking the halls and beating your head against their long walls in an even rhythm — a blossom, a spray of perfectly spaced blood red punctuation marks.

You escape, though no has been holding you there. You defy its rules, though no one has imposed any upon you. You always feel late, though you have no idea for what. You are always rushing — to — from — away — around — trying to get to that other place. You feel it rustling, whispering, tickling the insides of your bones, honeycombed through the marrow: an urge to move, an urge to leave, to go, beyond. You feel it until you think you will burst, you will spontaneously combust, you will — in a split second — cease to exist, annihilated by the magnitude of this inexplicable drive.

W.H. Hudson says that birds feel something akin to pain (and fear) just before migration and that nothing alleviates this feeling except flight (the rapid motion of wings).[235]

Your visit has been full of strange dreams. Tiresome, sleepless walk-ins that keep you not from sleep but from rest — you wake exhausted, covered in an anxious dew of perspiration. Last night, you had dreams about tattoos — that one day you woke with them on your skin, snaking down your arms and legs. Vines with flowers of two different varieties — Helleborus and Borago. To ward off the melancholy. But as the day progressed, they began to wilt: curling desiccated and withered, then wizened, scorched, sucked dry by the arid heat of your discontent. On your feet, the flowers dried and peeled off, petals and leaves — sad, verdant skins — onto the ground where your feet

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234 Robert Burton, 'Husbandry', *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 11th edn, 1 (London: J. and E. Hodson, 1806), p.313.

235 Lorine Niedecker, 'Letter, January 30, 1968', in *Between Your House and Mine: The Letters of Lorine Niedecker to Cid Corman, 1960-1970* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986), p.149.

fell as you walked, where the stress falls, leaving behind a wilted trail that remained moments only, until the breeze rose into a wind. Which it always does, feathered and eluvial. The image of the vines stays with you as you walk — creepers, seedlings, sprouts.

You think about all of the things that have been haunting you these past days, and one in particular that you can't seem to shake. You feel like a coward for never facing it entirely — for the number of times that you have asked, no, you have mumbled *why*, without specifying what you might do should anyone provide you with an answer. What you might then be responsible for. *No reason. Just because.*

You think about the building that you have been spending time in. How you want it to mean, what you want to say, and wonder why you seem to find yourself wordless. You have tried different approaches to writing: versions of how to inhabit a place, the rules of architecture, the parameters of rooms, what spaces ask you to do, think, feel, say, speak, listen, hear. But you feel that you are not entirely present. That each piece of writing is merely an exercise in style that has only surface and no depth. That you are saying nothing at all, really.

Drawing is taking a line for a walk.[236]

And so you go. You leave. You take your tired brain and your narrative for a walk. Through the doors, up the hill, over the field with its strange white stones, past the cemetery and through a hole in the giant, crumbling stone wall that contains the place that you are leaving. You walk, you fly — the lines of movement arc and curve around you, promise of distance, that sinuous melody.

The way the crow flies. You chase the sky. Flight of fancy. La vie dans un cerf volant. Tugging at the strings that binds you to the ground — kiting and wheeling — praying that you will be loosed into the air, subject to its whims and mercies — breezes, gusts, gales.

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236 Paul Klee, *The Thinking Eye: Notebooks,* ed. by Jurg Spiller and trans. by Ralph Manheim, 1 (London: LH, 1961), p. 109.

You walk and you walk, further and further. Past a group of cows that stare at you accusingly. Chewing slowly, calmly. Many of them are under trees or lying low to the ground. A sign that rain is on the horizon, though at present the sky is clear.

You walk through a small town, stopping briefly to look inside its church. You genuflect, out of habit, and sit for a moment in a pew. In comparison to the truly radiant day outside, it might as well be night-time inside the church, it is so dark and still, and you see not another soul. You remember all of the times that you went to church as a child and how terrified you were of making any noise. You sat silently, trying not to exist. You were so scared that you always forgot what to say when receiving the host and waited in terror and waited and waited as the Priest walked down the line of parishioners, straining to hear what was said as thanks, each time remembering just at the last crucial moment: *Amen*. You note for the first time, surprisingly, that the convent you have been staying in is relatively devoid of religious iconography. Save a few simple crosses, in the most vital places, God — though presumably *present* everywhere — is pictured hardly anywhere at all. Do you need to see something for it to be omnipresent?

His eyes are leaves, the birds his messengers. He spreads like fire — don't smile. Don't smile; he hates it. Pretend not to tremble.[237]

You continue your journey through the tiny town. A car speeds by, the only sign of life so far, and passes so near to you that the side view mirror brushes your sleeve. *Connard*, you whisper, and pause to catch your near-death breath. Looking out into the distance, you can see that all of the tiny towns that dot the hills and valleys, the loping horizons, are easily linked by church spires. Holy coordinates, constellations.

You walk through fields and fields and fields and up a steep hill, the wind whipping at your face, through your hair, through your jacket, and you are cold but barely notice from the heat of your exertion and your pace, which increases and increases and increases the longer you walk, the further you go. And your feet hurt and you don't really know where you are any more, but you don't care; you have never cared less about anything, ever.

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237 Julie Hayden, 'Day Old Baby Rats', *Lists of the Past* (Seattle: Pharos Editions, 2014), p.32-33.

A writer, when he's asked to discuss his craft, ought to get up and call out in a loud voice just the names of the writers he loves. I love Kafka, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Proust, O'Casey, Rilke, Lorca, Keats, Rimbaud, Burns, E. Brontë, Jane Austen, Henry James, Blake, Coleridge. I won't name any living writers. I don't think it's right.[238]

You yell names into the air — the words stream forth, hovering for a moment, glittering and turning in the air like prisms, light passing through and refracting outwards in infinite permutations. Here — you think — HAVE THEM! I give them to you. I anoint you — wind and hills and foreign green spaces to which I will never return. I anoint you keeper of the names and all of the hopes they carry — *bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh* — and keeper of me, their intimate host.

Father, Son, Holy Ghost.

Cimabue, Da Vinci, Giotto, Bellini, Grünewald, Friedrich, Rousseau, Millet, Courbet — I wrote to you, and you never replied!

Shakespeare, Dante, Keats, Shelley, Shelley, Brontë, Brontë, Brontë, Dickinson, Carr — and you, you as well — all of the namesakes, the mindsakes, the forgodsakes — why don't you answer?

Bach, Vivaldi, Chopin, Debussy, Satie, Ravel, Elgar — where are you? I hear you in the wind, but when I sit down to play, there is only silence.

Conesus. Hemlock. Canadice. Honeoye. Canadaigua. Keuka. Seneca. Cayuga. Owaso. Skaneateles. Otisco.

Old names sneak in without your permission. Hands closing and opening, baring their palms. And you yell them still, heedless of temporality and context, for they remain stuck there inside of you, deep within. Such is the force of repetition. And still, to you, they sound different each time. And still, to you, they sound beautiful each time — a consolation, now and then.

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238 J.D. Salinger, as cited in John C. Unrue, *J.D. Salinger* (Detroit: Gale Group, 2002), p.151.

You think that we do not know from where our language emerges, what ushers it forth. Why we are drawn to particular utterances over others. Why certain combinations of words are like the force of a gale, the blow of a fist. A death-bed whisper, a deep chest-rattle. These are — you suppose — the unspoken, deeply felt rules of language, after all. And structure. So close — unnervingly close — to personal mythology.

The sweetest thing of my life has been the longing…to know where all the beauty comes from.[239]

239 C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1956), p.75.

You Hated Spain.

You hated Spain.

Spain was the land of your dreams: the dust-red cadaver
You dared not wake with, the puckering amputations
No literature course had glamorized.[240]

Who am I kidding?

I.

I hated Spain.

Spain, where we went for Christmas, the one just past.

Spain, where a feeling of evil visited me with such force, such strength, such keenness that I thought I would expire. Evil is almost too generous a word, lavish and embarrassing in its plain extremity. But what else to call it? The thing that didn't kill me, but whose smouldering remains might one day reignite and scare me to death.

We went to Madrid. To the Prado. *Descent from the Cross*, by Rogier van der Weyden. Our lady of tears, our lady of sorrows. I was haunted by Mary and her grief, the opalescent beads of inevitable pain that sat on her cheeks for all of eternity, the swoon tightly compressed in the foreground. The museum's interminable halls and the rooms they spawned to each side, stretching on and on and on. I remembered why I decided to study Modern and Contemporary Art — it was too hard, impossible to see these paintings simply as pieces of History, allegories, objective objects. I am not religious, but I am very suggestible. Ask if I'm thirsty, I'll say — *I could be.* Madonna della Misericordia, I would think — open your cloak and take me in, give me shelter. Not out of desire *for* shelter, but out of desire to know what such desire would feel like — *Yes, I'm parched* — prostration's promised succour; foreshortened Christ, Christ in the tomb, predella of penitence.

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240 Ted Hughes, 'You Hated Spain', in *The Oxford Book of Travel Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.92.

And there was Goya, too, with his dark truths. *The Horrors of War* and *Los Caprichos*. Penitents with a circle of figures hovering above them — what are they? — witches dancing in the air? And the clothing in all of these images, the pointed caps and the masks, the costume of the Inquisition, terrifies me to my core. I kept trying to explain to my parents, but all I could manage was — I want to leave now, I need to go, I can't take any more — of *this*. They looked at me, confused, but you love Art! I was worried that it wasn't true at all. I didn't love Art: I loved the witchy embrace, choreography of the damned.

I hated Spain.

Spain, where I thought — five years later — still — and it is here with me — still — again. The terrible Christmas that we went away to the tropics and in a pivotal twisting twist of fate — twist the blade — one night a gang of masked intruders broke into the house in which we were staying and held us hostage for seven hours while they ransacked the house and terrorized us. The thing I never mention, when people say — oh it must be so nice to go away for Christmas, you're so *lucky* I would love to get out of here, this lousy weather. The thing that remains dormant, silent. Because what would be the point? I do not have, I cannot find, I may never know the words to explain. For no matter how you try to confine things, to explain within narrative, structure, and form, there are some moments that will never fit, some that will always escape — the substance of their materiality is of a different order, another world. The words ring hollow and untrue, no matter how accurate. Because sometimes accuracy isn't what counts. Accuracy paints a picture but, alone, it cannot bestow sensibility. For this, something else is required.

Which mannerly devotion shows in this.[241]

How to explain the hours spent fearing, imagining, waiting for a violent death. And that afterwards, in a sense, even having escaped it, you are still waiting, your psyche still wanting, smarting, wilting in the face of what was promised. What you now know, in the heart of your heart, to be possible — *I know it with my great tap root.*[242] And with it the

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241 William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, I.5.98.

242 Sylvia Plath, 'Elm', *Ariel*, p.25.

niggling notion of having narrowly averted something that you might have deserved. For why else would it have appeared in your life? You are a cheat, a thief, an elaborate ruse.

Because now you have been reconstituted in accordance with its constitutive principles. It is the theme and you are the variation, contrapuntal. You obey, an abeyance — obeah. There is the fact, too, that when you speak of it you are blank-faced and impassive — because reciting details in order to make sense seems to produce a narrative, an experience that you cannot identify with. I wasn't there for that, you think, surely not. *What a story*. As if you left yourself for that period of time, yes, the holiday was — a vacation.

And as you sit there and people move around you and move on with their lives and forget about what you have told them, you feel like some kind of gaudy, prostrated Monster. You feel that you are full of seams and cracks and fissures that are being stretched and pulled and the stuffing, my god, the stuffing is about to burst right out. But no one notices. No one says anything at all.

We like to think that words can be used to truly communicate, to harness what it is that we want, that we need to say — *talk it out!* But if the signifier and the signified don't match don't line don't add up, if there is a discrepancy, then over time the gap widens, it becomes a cavity a crevice a chasm, an abyss. Sometimes, you stay as far away from the edge as possible. Other times, you peer straight down into it, throw a tightrope across and take a deep breath. But you never, ever ask anyone to come with you. You are not sure if this is a weakness or a strength — or if it simply *is*. The unsignifiable — *the unnameable*.

We went to the Reina Sofia, where my parents were bored, but I felt more at home. They left early to go back to the apartment, and I continued on, wandering through the rooms. When I left, in the dark, on my own, to go meet them, I took the elevator down from the top floor to the exit. A glass box that shuttled down the exterior of the building, smooth and silent, and the moon was jumping in the window panes, bobbing like a manic white face. I strained to see and also to not see if it held a smile, a grimace, a grin. Fear and terror keeps you intrigued but at bay, the double bind of morbid fascination.

I talk to God, but the sky is empty.[243]

I think it is possible that every Christmas I wait — again — to die. Is this it I'm sure this is it finally now now now. Each time it's not, but I am a little bit closer. To what. To something I can't see can't touch can only feel sometimes smell almost taste. It is a mourning of sorts. For the tiny parts of me that are not dead but dying. That I kill off. That I sacrifice. Not freely but not ungrudgingly either. We are partners in crime, me and my trauma, me and my grief — a drug, me and my morbid belief, my melancholy relief.

An oh, the things you hold onto, tight and fast to your chest. Oh the things you keep to yourself.

The colour of someone's shoes and the squeak of their soles next to your face. *Mrs. Doubtfire* on the television, and then Christmas carols on the CD player. The same album on repeat, 'Agnus Dei', the only way to tell time — *Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us*. The broken glass on the floor that cut into your face. The piece you hid in your pocket. The barrel of a gun against the base of your skull. The whisper in your ear. *We don't want to hurt you, but we will.* A conciliatory whisper that almost makes you feel sorry for the invaders — for all invaders. *Good girl, good girl.* You feel that you might have been one too — for you have been a thief at times — you have invaded, you have stolen. If only from yourself. Forgive us father, we know not what we do. How all of a sudden it was all simply, resolutely over. But how it has also never ended. You keep these things. Relics. Talismans.

You keep to yourself that one day you were convinced that you must already be dead and that this was life after death. And so you sat on the floor of your kitchen for three hours, watching the sun move around the room and thinking what it might mean if this was true. And then you got up and carried on with your day. Because if it was true then, well, it was, and so what. You keep to yourself the fact that hours are different to you now. Solid, discrete entities riddled with fear. You count them. You count lots of things. But you count on nothing — no *thing* — in particular.

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243 Sylvia Plath, '28 January 1956', in *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Karen V. Kukil (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), p.199.

It feels selfish sometimes. All of the keeping. People want to understand. They want to know you, to really know — *tell me, please*. But you think that you are a pretty giving person and this you don't want to share, because it begins to feel like a concession — giving pieces of something away. Pieces of something that — once outside of you — becomes less, and less, and less, each time — until there is nothing left but a baggy corpse full of holes, death mask removed, so that it is very hard to recognize, to remember in a coherent fashion, what once was.

Listing the details renders them both meaningless and full of infinite power, reverence. And you refuse to allow words to be your ruin. Anything but words. A Faustian pact with the unutterable: please don't let the words extinguish me.

And so you smile when people say it's nice that you go away for Christmas, and when your parents suggest Spain you say sure, great, sounds good, I look forward to the trip. You lie through your teeth, even though you think it might be slowly rotting you from the inside out, because you can't seem to conceive of any real alternative. Confession sometimes greatens rather than lessens the burden of the secret — of secrecy. Or perhaps without the notion of confession — telling — saying — secrecy would not exist at all. And would that be so bad? We could give words, we could give narrative a break every once in a while.

But there you have it, in any case: we went to Spain. We went to Spain, and I thought I would die. I thought I would die of loneliness, and many of other things, too.

I hated Spain.

We drank cheap wine at dinner, and I slept on a full stomach — dreaming fitfully of an immaculate conception. But there was no Joseph, he was not even a question mark in the doorway. I was alone, and when the baby was born, radiating his unholy holy light, I wrapped him in blankets and tried to hide him in a box under the bed, thinking how I had been hoping for a girl. Niña, I whispered, dondé. Remembering, when I woke, that this was what the gypsy said to me on the street the day before when she grabbed my ankle as I walked by, from where she sat on a cold stone step.

Niña, dondé. And in her other hand, a crucifix.

We flew and then drove, down and then up — south, but into the hills. They were there too, everywhere, the Holy Family. Fields of olive trees blanketed the terrain that undulated into uneven distances. There was a terrace outside my room that I could not figure out how to get to, though all night I could hear the wind whistling along it so loudly it was hard to believe there was no one, no thing there. Hard to believe that something invisible could generate such an undeniable presence. But it was only the wind. And what else could it have been?

Noli me tangere, for Caesar's I am,
And wild for to hold, though I seem tame.[244]

Though I had never been to Spain before, something caused my knees to buckle several times with the force of déja-vu. I broke some things, off-kilter, off-balance, fumbling to regain equilibrium — a full bottle of wine, a glass, a small duck figurine, a light bulb. On the day we arrived, I broke all of these things before it was even dark outside. They just seemed to slip through my fingers.

In the sun, in the morning, I didn't break anything, but the light broke my heart into a tiny million pieces — its cold, clear light stabbing into my centre so that I felt I knew when I died it would be by the hand of something so sharp and true that it would leave hardly a trace, passing into shadow and then nothingness. *Ça me perce.*

Symbols are popular; they alone can link disparate pain — an acceptable shared understanding, courtesy of abstraction. Metaphor. Allegory. Iconography. Hence the predella; the tears; the wilt; the bend, the break. Figures foregrounded tightly in misery. Bodies carefully arranged in parentheses of grief.

One day, driving through the cold countryside hills, I saw a strange sculpture crowning a roundabout. I had never seen such a thing, save for in one, very particular place. It was an old fashioned chocolate grinder. I yelled out from the back seat — the bride! Stripped bare! And her bachelors! Even!

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244 Thomas Wyatt, 'Whoso List to Hunt, I Know where is an Hind', in *The Art of the Sonnet*, ed. by Stephen Burt and David Mikics (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p.26.

Even.

And a moment later, it was gone.

We went to an old fortress — a church that used to be a mosque that used to be a church that used to be a mosque, etc.

We went to a convent in the hills, and it was so cold, even with modern heating, that I could not imagine the coldness of a life there when it had been in operation. Nuns, young girls, circling the cloisters in endless, frozen prayer.

We went to the Al Hambra, and we had to leave so early to get there in time for our ticketed entrance that it was still dark outside when we started to drive. We drove on and on and I could feel the moon behind us, boring a hole in my back, staring accusatory, unblinking. I looked out the window and thought that if I lived here I might get up this early each day and watch as the bald earth peeled back its skin to meet the sun, rows of olive trees bleeding to the surface — a raised scratch, beaded even as drops of blood. Even while I knew it to be untrue, I thought that I would feel razed clean, purified — transubstantiated. I thought that if I could just remember to say — *Amen*.

Say thanks for the sky…say it to the floorboards.[245]

We went to Seville, where my bedroom window opened into an alley, and each night I was woken by a different host of raucous echoes. Everyone is lost, it seems. A Russian family fights in the street, heatedly pulling the map this way and that until the man tears it and the woman hits him, hard. *We came from THIS way and not from THAT way* — an American couple argues, their children in matching outfits trailing behind — *Matty says that in Paris, even babies can drink wine*. On the last night there is a chorus of song — guitar and some bongos. A nativity parade. They circle the block another time, the two men in front swagger swagger saunt. Jesus leads the way. A bottle of spiked Coca-Cola hangs from his belt. He walks like we owe him. Like everyone owes him. I imagine that if I

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245 Mary Karr, 'Facing Altars: Poetry and Prayer', in *Pushcart Prize XXXI: Best of the Small Presses*, ed. by Bill Henderson (Wainscott, NY: Pushcart Press, 2006), p.98.

were Jesus, I might feel that way too. Beside Jesus is a ruddy-faced angel whose wings have come unfastened; they hang at a rakish angle, and one has been bent backwards in half.

I hated Spain.

But I would go back, if you asked me to. I would go back, just to see how it is possible for something to come and go so quickly and not even leave a visible mark. I would go back if it meant that maybe — *tell me* — if I tried hard enough — *the unnameable* — I could describe some of this to you, and you would understand.

We never know self-realization.
We are two abysses – a well staring at a sky.[246]

Even.

Out in the hills again, you think about Spain. The feeling you had that you knew evil, intimately, and could see life stretching ahead of you grinning and toothless, all scorched red earth and burnt, soldering light. How it seemed to open in you avenues and routes for all of the other sad, evil things your mind had been holding onto. Is this what happens? Open the floodgates and — *after me the deluge* — it all comes out in a blurt, awkward and contorted, incomplete.

Either way, there it all lay before you, at your feet. The death of your Art History professor, the one with whom you had long conversations about Maurice Denis — you both wanted to know, could the artist have been so *simply* and *happily* interested in faith, fundamentally un-tortured by anything deeper? The death of the artist, a friend of your family who gave you books and paintings and works from when you were very young and who you did not go to see on his deathbed, where he lay dying of an enlarged heart. And he had asked where you were. And then, and now, it is too late. It will always be too late. The death of your friend's brother, the boy who committed suicide. Whose mother called you early one Easter morning and asked you to go to your friend, to tell her what had happened — because no mother wants her daughter to be alone when hearing such things. How unspeakably sad it was to witness such an event, but how you would never ever have considered for a moment saying no, and when it was all over and you had taken her to the airport to catch a flight home, you cried all the way home, wishing that there was someone you could bargain with to shoulder some of the grief, even knowing that some things must necessarily be borne in solitude. How the sounds that people in pain make are terrible. Like the girl in your high school whose mother died of cancer and whose sister died three months later, after being struck by lightning. We describe the noises as inhuman, but that is only because — upon hearing them — we wish to believe no such utterances might be naturally occurring. 'Animal', we say — but *we are* animals.

So many deaths, it seems, occluding perforce all of the life that you must surely have witnessed, too. You are always looking for edge — *finisterre* — as though at its border, its

246 Pessoa, p.20.

sharp clean line, the sheer drop of the cliff below and down and down and below, you might find that everything would fall away and you would be free.

The flash of her eyes had been succeeded by a dream and melancholy softness; they no longer gave the impression of looking at the objects around her; they appeared always to gaze beyond, and far beyond – you would have said out of this world…[247]

You think that maybe you aren't really living your life very well. Always somewhere else. Looking for some other place. The green of your eyes murky and distant, like the weeds that bracket Tarkovsky's *Solaris* — the liminal, the timeless, the sacrifice of unbeing, nonbeing, always being some other place and also here. Swaying, submerged, waterlogged. Beautiful, but ultimately, fixed in place.

And now it rose up before her – the life she might have lived.[248]

You sink to your knees in the green field, and you think that you will remember this moment always. How high up it is, the sky all around you, and you think, you *know*, it will never be enough. And the wind rushes around you and you rock gently with its force, blood rushing through your ears like shells, sweet acoustic mirrors, acousmoniums of the deep.

The wet of the grass seeps through the knees of your jeans and you look down at your boots that are starting to come apart from all of the walking. And you think, you *know*, it will never be enough, none of it, and you cry because it seems so obvious to you and prosaic and commonplace because of course nothing *means* anything — that's for us to do — meaning — meanness — *poor, bare, forked animal.*[249] And you wondered why you ever thought it would be different, and will it, will you, will I, will we — do we — do people — ever change.

You tear up a handful of grass and throw it into the air. It doesn't even blow away in the wind, just falls back onto the ground in front of you. Grass on grass — lines on lines, in different directions. Green on green on green on green. Meaningful unceremony.

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247 Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ann Arbor LLC, 2006), p.136.

248 Anne Carson, 'Latest Room', in *Men in the Off Hours* (London: Random House, 2011), p.26.

249 William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, III.4.1901-2.

In a field nearby, you see rows of leafless vines that look like a series of question marks or commas, neatly lined up, asking, asking — waiting for their turn — punctuate, divide, pause. No words between, just symbols, an outline filled with gaping silences. You think of Schopenhauer — 'the melancholy genius reveals from time to time elation, which characterizes him, and is possible for him alone, an elation which is derived from the spirit's most perfect objectivity, and hovers like a high radiance on his forehead: *in tristia hilaris, in hilaritate tristis*.'[250] You know you're not a genius, but you wonder if it might be possible — still — even — to understand the relationship between the two: melancholy and radiance. Maybe you could fill the silences between them; maybe you could trace the connection with words, stories, description.

You feel buoyant for moment, in the hills. Green on green on green. Kite loosed in the breeze; you can see a lot from up here. But you notice, too, that the sun begins to set, and your string tugs at you to return to solid ground, where it is not as windy, and you can place your feet firmly on the earth. You realise that you have walked miles and that you have no idea where you are.

You find the nearest road and stand there with your arm outstretched, thumb pointing upwards. Thumbs up; thanks for the sky. Finally, a truck pulls over — two farmers. You fumble through some rudimentary French, explaining that you have accidentally walked very far and need a ride back to the convent. They look at you in surprise, eyes wide — but that is miles away! — suspicious, as though you are an escapee. They point to the open back of the truck and you climb in. Everything stinks of manure, but as you bump and trundle along, over the roads and around the curves, you are afforded magnificent views of the countryside and the gently lowering sun.

You can hear them laughing up front – 'heh, mon dieu – Americaine folle!'

In tristia hilaris, in hilaritate tristis.

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250 Arthur Schopenhauer, *Sämtliche Werke*, 2 (Darmstadt: Wolfgang von Löhneysen, 1968), p.494, as cited in Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson, *As a Weasel Sucks Eggs: An Essay on Melancholy and Cannibalism* (Berlin; NewYork: Sternberg, 2008), p.47.

Contradiction experienced to the very depths of the being tears us heart and soul: it is the cross.
The union of contradictions involves a wrenching apart. It is impossible without extreme suffering.[251]

The Golden Section.

There was a girl who believed in the moment. She was a writer.

She knew that other people had a more defined sense of cause and effect, or plot. But her sense of life was more moment, moment, moment. Looking back, they accrued and occurred to her at certain times. Often she did not know why, but she trusted that they were coming back for a reason. She trusted that she could put these moments together and create a story. A leap of faith. The moment needs to die in order that the rest of us may live.

As time passed and her writing became progressively more extreme, this gift of transforming every detail grew steadily, until each trivial event became the occasion for a story: a cut finger, a fever, a bruise. The doors on the train that pressed against her back with wind and velocity, with the force of a dark beast. The bird she watched one day as she looked out over the water from a bridge above, its emaciated wings outstretched like a thin black cross.

She felt that she lived in a fractal, infinitely spiralling inward to a centre that grew smaller and smaller, tinier and tinier, into the slightest of increments, driving towards that central point. The pause. The apex. The place where everything lined up and coalesced to show the radiant meaning beneath everything she knew she could only hint at imperceptibly the rest of the time. Especially in words. *Find the exact centre of any line AB. Divide a line in mean and extreme ratio.* The Golden section.

The 0, then the 1, the beginning point, only the lonely, singular unit from which all else issues. The heart of the heart, the hole in the whole, with its fleshy, life-sustaining beat.

She felt that at the heart of the heart, the centre of the centre, the hole in the whole, there was a feeling of clarity, clean and cold like a blade. The knowledge that it was

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251 Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (Hove, UK: Psychology Press, 2002), p.101.

possible to be pierced by an instant — *ça me perce*, I am punctured, wounded — twist the knife. And that, thereafter, the channel is always open.

She saw that the world was full of contradictions. For instance, love of tradition *and* detachment from the past; or God as the supreme reality *and* as nothingness. But are these really contradictions if they are simply ideas that are true on different planes of understanding?

Reason discerns the two ends of the chain but the centre which unites them is only accessible to indemonstrable intuition.[252]

Like in Da Vinci's *Adoration of the Magi*. He left the face of the Virgin Mary blank because it was impossible not only to depict but to imagine. Some argue it is an iconoclastic gesture, but she knew that *she knew* otherwise.

She thought that she just wanted things to be as beautiful as possible.

She worried that everything she made was ugly and sad.

In the beginning was the word —

She had a deep misgiving that someday she would discover she knew nothing at all. That all she had was thoughts that connected only to each other. That all systems of knowledge, expression, meaning, and understanding were tautologies. Even natural predilections — love, happiness, desire — seemed to take part in a sense of the pre-ordained. What is pure, then, is not what we believe but the nothing that precedes it. And the nothing that we know grows in direction proportion to the something that we believe. So — does prayer then precede faith?

You know nothing…you feel nothing, you are locked in a most savage and terrible ignorance, I despise you, my boy, ***mon cher****, my heart.*[253]

My dear, mon Coeur.

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252 Ibid.

253 Donald Barthelme, 'The Indian Uprising', in *Sixty Stories* (London: Penguin, 2003), p.103.

She thought that the cloisters and the so-called 'atrium' at which they met were unusual. A cross shape – *Kreuzung* – instead of circular. The cross impedes movement: back and forth is not the same as around and around. In a circle, beginnings and ends dissolve and disappear, smoothed over as though they never existed in the first place. In a cross, they are accentuated. One begins, proceeds, and is halted, stopped short — forced back — across — through — the same point — in a different direction — again and again. The circle is the sublimity of time, and the cross is its tyranny. Though it is true that there is in the cross only — only in the cross — the possibility of all forces coming to meet in one place — one instant — the moment — apotheosis. The centre of the cross with its arms branching out, a series of endlessly repeating mesostics.

She thought about the walls of the cloisters, the outside edges of the cross: uninterrupted sequences of slender vertical panes of glass that vary in width — separated by thin ribs of concrete. They reminded her of real ribs, or a harp whose strings have been plucked, vibrations rippling outward at rhythmic intervals — waves and ripples frozen mid-string, mid-sound. She wishes she could run her hands along them — taut and tendonous.

She thought about the distance, the space from here to the radiant world — trying to imagine how one might measure it in hands, feet, elbows, knees, beams of light, wishes. A friend had once said to her that he had been out walking one day listening to music, and as he entered a particular park, on a particular path, something came over him and, for what seemed like no reason at all, he began to weep. She had nodded, yes, I know — moments, junctures, prisms — where and when everything lines up.

Many people, most people spend their lives trying to understand *what* it is that lines up — and how and where and why. She preferred simply to let these moments happen, underpinned by no reason at all. You can only feel the real truth of any moment in absence of its prediction. Indeterminacy, the framing without the frame, is where pure geometry exists — the beautiful proof. *Terminus*, the limit + *de*, the form. And what do we do when we get there, when we arrive? We tilt our heads back and look upwards — hoping that nothing remains, internal or external, to hinder or impede the view and our drive like an arrow into its centre. The heart of the heart of the heart of the matter.

Loneliness ripens the eccentric, the daringly, estrangingly beautiful, the poetic. But loneliness also ripens the perverse, the disproportionate, the absurd, the illicit.

Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*

Vespers.

29 March.

Dear X.,

It occurs to me that you might not even be reading these letters. And indeed, if the essay is already a conversation — an argument with the self — then why, you ask, am I writing to you? Scott Russell Sanders describes the essay form as 'naked, lonely, quixotic letters to the world'.[254] But there is also a long history of the epistolary essay, from Seneca and Plutarch to the 18th Century broadsheets — Samuel Johnson's *The Rambler* essays and Addison & Steele's *The Spectator*.[255] In the 20th century, think of Virginia Woolf's 'A Letter to a Young Poet' and *Three Guineas*, or E.M. Cioran's 'Some Blind Alleys: A Letter'.

Sometimes the address needs to be more pointed — you need a My Dear or Dearest or I implore you, Fine Sir, Gentleman, Lady. Because a letter is a specific mode of address. With a particular correspondent in mind, even if imagined, disclosures and evasions alike become deliberate in a different way — for the simple fact that we say different things to different people. It is just another literary version of the dialogic function, of course, but I want to tell you that *you* are not a character: *you* are very real to *me*. Essays in letter form have also been called *apologies* or *consolations* — as in the case of Plutarch's 'Consolation to His Wife', an essay that mourns the passing of the writer's young daughter.

And so even if my words have been falling on deaf ears, the speaking, the saying, the writing has been important to me. Though I don't like to admit, as it affords you a power over me, this correspondence has been a *consolation*, small succour. A pocket full of smooth stones.

Only one is a wanderer. Two together are always going somewhere.[256]

There is a selfishness to it, I must admit. When I read the essays I had written about Ana Mendieta, trying to find her work, trying to understand many things, I didn't recognise myself at all. The voice sounded hollow and foreign. It has taken me a long time to

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254 Scott Russell Sanders, 'The Singular First Person', in *Earthworks: Selected Essays* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), p.2.

255 Among Johnson's most well-known epistolary works are 'Letter to Lord Chesterfield' and 'On Gay's Epitaph'. Addison & Steele frequently included essays that that had letters embedded within, for instance, 'Love Letters'.

256 *Vertigo*, dir. Alfred Hitchcock (Paramount, 1958)

mourn my inexplicable sense of loss at the fact. This time, I wanted it to sound different; though I suspect it doesn't — we are who we are. Voice is a pathology, a healthy virus: it adapts to survive. And what a funny assumption, too, that one would be, should be, could be exactly the same on the page as in person.

Am I trying to show you that I am not afraid? In the essay, you are vulnerable — rocking back and forth on your threadbare hobby-horse, repeating phrases, fistfuls of talismans tightly clutched. So if I involve you intimately in this process as it unfolds, an open letter of confession, then I can say that I am bold and brave, that I have no shame. Perhaps I want to implicate you, too — I want to say: this belongs to all of us, which makes it not a confession but a statement. We have a contract, *we be of one blood, ye and I*.[257]

The true confessors have been aware that not only is life mostly failure, but that in one's failure or pettiness or wrong-ness exists the living drama of the self.[258]

It's just — sometimes I forget that correspondence is supposed to go *both ways*. I wonder if I embarrass or make you uncomfortable with some of my disclosures. Maybe that's why you never reply. But I know that correspondents are not always collaborators, and vice versa. We cannot always force minds to meet in concert, to fuse seamlessly.

But exchange is a kind of transformation, and — as such — full of strange continuities and evolutions. Order to disorder, or vice versa, for instance — the concept of entropy. In sound, as Xenakis writes, 'We can conceive of other continuous transformation: for example, a set of plucked sounds transforming continuously into a set of arco sounds, or in electromagnetic music, the passage from one sonic substance to another, assuring thus an organic connection between the two substances.'[259] Though 'organic', exchange and entropy can sometimes be violent, sudden, and extreme: *a transformation may be explosive when deviations from the mean suddenly become exceptional.*[260] Stochastic laws to live by. Is it like eros and thanatos, the birth and death drives so intimately bound? Is destruction a kind of devotion, iconoclasm a kind of desire? Gouge the eyes, cut one out and stick it on a metronome — *object to be destroyed* — and you will only be mocked by a lack of fulfilment.

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257 Rudyard Kipling, 'Kaa's Hunting', in *The Jungle Book* (New York: The Century Co., 1920), p.50.

258 Gore Vidal, 'The Sexus of Henry Miller', in *Sexually Speaking: Collected Sex Writings* (Berkeley: Cleis Press, 1999), p.25.

259 Xenakis, *Formalized Music*, p.16.

260 Ibid.

Transformations are everywhere here at *Le Couvent*. Transubstantiation. Sweet, sliding alchemies. Light into dark, sun into shadow, straight lines into arcs and curves — all depending on the time of day, and location, perspective. Music into windows. Philosophy into sightlines, structures, foundations. Theology into Architecture. Hinges upon hinges, swinging, angling back and forth, face to face, back to back.

I just wanted to paint a white and grey picture that would still have colour in its veins as we have blood under our winter-white skin.[261]

People collaborate, but forms do, too. Forms understand each other. They sense deep affinities — shapes, ideas, architectures, philosophies — that belong together, that elucidate, expand, contract and expose each other, based not on surface continuity, but on a deep interconnection among ideas. A powerful cohesion. Like metaphor. Not as mirrors or reflections, but metonymical shifts — forms share, forms borrow parts to stand in for the whole, moving away down the line to use that borrowed piece again, to erect a new structure to inhabit. Consanguinities, we could call them. Bloodlines that fork like branches in different directions, the same viscous substance nonetheless carried by their conduits, pulsing in recognition.

Such is the nature of collaboration. The hope, the idealism, the faith. That through interaction we gain in meaning. We grow in purpose.

The case of Le Couvent de la Tourette is an interesting one. Superficially, a strange choice for both Le Corbusier and Xenakis, as each was firmly secular. But, as Père Le Couturier advocated with his religious commissions, an artist need not believe in God in order to appreciate or produce a sacred aesthetic. The religious ethos of La Tourette, along with its spatial needs, abstracted neatly into values that shared common goals with secular philosophies of architecture, engineering, and music. As Xenakis recalls, 'It was necessary to follow their planning of the physical spaces. Of circulations and functions, and to organize them in the best possible way into receptacles that were stark but resonantly architectural. To discover, to create a different, other architecture, unique and

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261 Dorothea Tanning, '[Letter to Tate, 15 January 1960, re. *A Mi-Voix,*]', as cited in Victoria Carruthers, 'Dorothea Tanning, A Mi-Voix, 1958', *Tate* (2012) < http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/tanning-a-mi-voix-t00298/text-catalogue-entry> [accessed 12 October 2013]

original in its essential nudity – that was our goal.'[262] *Unique and original in its essential nudity.* And by all means, why not.

With both prayer and poetry, we use elegance to exalt, but we also beg and grieve and tremble. We suffer with prayer and poetry alike. Boy, do we suffer.[263]

Hundreds of sketches and blueprints were produced for the project. Throughout, you can see the evolution of the space — the search for form — the working out of a problem — rearranging things, translating shapes into different shapes to find a solution. Some draughts are perfectly clear, while others are entirely illegible. On many of the pages the Modulor, a tiny man with one arm raised above his head, haunts the margins: spectre, shadowy figure, with his elemental, determining proportions. I imagine him crawling the pages, detective of the draughts, trying to decipher Xenakis' script that scrawls through the gutters. It is a relief to see that some pages are crossed out entirely with *ANNULÉ — cancelled —* written across. Some plans don't work, so you simply start again, return to the certainty of your practice and something will eventually cohere.

We asked the captain what course
of action he proposed to take toward
a beast so large, so terrifying, and
unpredictable. He hesitated to
answer, then said judiciously:
'I think I shall praise it. [264]

At La Tourette, the practice and the process was a lengthy and invovled one. Le Corbusier came up with the intital sketches for the site, particularly the all-inclusive rectangle, from the cell plan of the Charterhouse at Ema. For La Tourette, the even, horizontal line of the base foundation was to be inverted: the top line of the cells would remain uniform and level as the ground and the other floors of the building sloped downhill and away from it. It was left to Xenakis to organize architecturally the spaces, the functions, and the circulations of the building. From 1956 – 1958, he worked on-site with a drawing tablet and took frequent meetings with the Dominican fathers, following

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262 Iannis Xenakis, 'Preface', in Le Corbusier, *La Tourette and Other Buildings and Projects: 1955-1957* (New York: Garland, 1984), p. ix.

263 Karr, p.96.

264 Robert Hass, 'Epigraph', in *Praise* (New York: Ecco, 1979), p.1.

which he would return to converse with Le Corbusier, who would then accept or modify the drawing.[265]

Due to Le Corbusier's fame, the building is most commonly attributed to him alone. While few know precisely what was contributed by whom, it is well-documented that Xenakis is individually responsible for many of La Tourette's novel architectural details: the undulating glass facades, the lighting in the church, the layout of the cells, and the comb-like pilotis that form the base support of the longest arm of the cloisters.

Le Corbusier and Xenakis fell out a short while later, while working on the Philips Pavilion at the Brussels Expo, 1958. Xenakis felt the older man was taking credit for work that had been Xenakis'; and when he and fellow-contributor, Edgar Varèse, voiced their concerns, they returned to the atelier one morning to find the locks changed. Nonetheless, Xenakis' statement — written nearly 30 years later — is generous towards his mentor, referring to the collaboration at La Tourette as 'a perpetual and rich exchange…understanding, cooperative, creative, free and independent, quick-thinking, never trying to crush me or to reject my own discoveries…The monastery has remained for me a luminous memory.'[266]

A luminous memory.

I wonder what it will remain for me? What will the afterimage be? What faint, bitter scent will these letters leave hanging in the air when I leave, and what of all the tortuous meditations the different spaces have produced in my mind?

We are here to witness. There is nothing else to do with these mute materials we do not need.[267]

I want to write a collection of essays about the convent, one for each part of it that I have spent time in — obeying its rules, the circulations and functions of the Dominican day. But I know that they will necessarily be essays about something else, too. In *The*

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265 'After each elaboration I asked Le Corbusier for a meeting, and he accepted or modified my drawing. As soon as he accepted it, I marked it with the initials L.C. and the date.' Xenakis, 'Preface', in *La Tourette and Other Buildings and Projects*, p. x.

266 Ibid.

267 Annie Dillard, 'Teaching a Stone to Talk', in *Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, ed. by Robert Gottlieb (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 34.

Open Form, Alfred Kazin writes that, after Marx and Freud, one can no longer see the essay as an expression of 'the individual's wholly undetermined and freely discovered point of view'.[268] The question is not only what have I determined, but what has determined me. Hence the essayist's introspection, the probing scrutiny, the sometimes painful picking apart of thought, feeling, sensibility.

One writes out of one thing only – one's own experience…This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art.[269]

Order into disorder. I find myself back at *entropy* — old friend, smouldering reminiscence.

Yesterday, I walked in the fields beyond the convent. I thought about words and repetitions — all of the phrases, poems, words that ring and sing in my ears. Here at this convent, with its formal alchemies and structural transubstantiations, I have been worried about language. For other materials, it seem so much easier to move and to breathe, to slide into different incarnations of the same concept.

As I walked, I fingered the pieces of white quartz in my pocket and thought of Robert Smithson, hallowed priest of the entropic, who wrote, 'words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any *word* long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void.'[270] The quotation resounded into another from Montaigne.

Our disputes are purely verbal. I ask what is 'nature', 'pleasure', 'circle', 'substitution'. The question is one of words and is answered in the same way. 'A stone is a body.' But if you pressed on: 'And what is a body?' – 'Substance' – 'And what is substance?' – and so on, you would finally drive the respondent to the end of his lexicon. We exchange one word for another word, often more unknown.[271]

What does it mean? That language is infinite? Or that language is futile? Wittgenstein writes, 'if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then *nothing* gets lost. But the

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268 Alfred Kazin, 'The Essay as a Modern Form', in *The Open Form: Essays for Our Time* (New York: Harcourt, 1961), p.x.

269 James Baldwin, 'Autobiographical Notes', in *James Baldwin Collected Essays*, ed. T. Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), p.8.

270 Smithson, 'The Dying Language', in *Robert Smithson, the Collected Writings*, p.107.

271 Montaigne, 'Of Experience', in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, p.818-819.

unutterable will be – unutterably – *contained* in what has been uttered!'[272] Likewise, Goethe wonders how to 'keep the essential quality still living before us, and not kill it with the word'.[273]

because there is in this world no one thing
to which the bramble of ***blackberry*** *corresponds,*
a word is elegy to what it signifies…
After a while I understood that,
talking this way, everything dissolves: ***justice,***
pine, hair, woman, you *and* ***I.***[274]

Our stories, our explanations — do we wish them death, kill them with words? Or perhaps not absolutely — we grant them a kind of afterlife, instead. Maybe this is what narrative is for: a means of preservation, ministrations at the tomb side.

To write or not to write? To language or not to language? Where is the middle ground? Would it strike halfway to say that writing is…a secular benediction? That the labour, the *essay* of writing is an exchange for the meaning we might reach, much like the sign is an exchange for the signified? Partial and arbitrary, yes, but one way of bargaining with knowledge and experience. A fair exchange.

For each of 'The Little Day Hours' — Prime (9am), Terce (noon), Sext (3pm), None (6pm) — the Dominicans say a series of prayers. There are specific psalms and numbers of rosaries and benedictions outlined, but if you are too busy, they say you should make up your own — 'ejaculations' they call them.

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Words or phrases that you can work into your daily activity with little effort, each *ejaculation* is a sign that you are thinking of God. Even if it makes no explicit reference to prayer, the saying of the chosen word is like a contract, a symbol, a sign that carries meaning via association and repetition. No matter what you believe about God, it's true that we do give power to words. I do, at least.

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272 Ludwig Wittgenstein, as cited in *Key Writers on Art: The Twentieth Century*, ed. by Chris Murray (London: Routledge, 2005), p.270.
273 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'Concluding Observations on Terminology, no. 754', in *Goethe's Theory of Colours*, trans. C.L. Eastlake (London: John Murray, 1840), p. 302.
274 Hass, 'Meditation at Lagunitas', *Praise*, p. 4.

All words, by nature, participate in an elaborate system of metaphor and metonymy. Just a slight side-step here and there — a letter more or less — a rhythm, a rhyme — and you find yourself in a place that bears only a passing resemblance to where you began. Maybe this is where the shift occurs: not in the materiality of the words, but the means by which they can yoke dissimilarities. A system with devices built in to upend, to *un*write itself. To press where it hurts, lace your fingers through the holes. For instance, just exactly *how* can a thought be green? I'm not sure, but damned if I don't want to hear all of the beautiful illogics.

Alchemies and transformations. I myself am a persona who wears the label 'I', and like Montaigne, *I am constantly adorning myself, for I am constantly describing myself*,[275] with these words that both empty me of and fill me with meaning.

Transubstantiations. And relics, too, another kind of shape-shifting. Cornerstones, keystones of religion, depending on your faith.

Eyes. Teeth. Hair. Fingernails.
A piece of bone. A limb. A skull. A rib, a tooth, some hair. Pieces of clothing, a book, private papers.

A rosary, a crown of thorns. A point along the mourning procession — an Eleanor Cross — there are only three left.

A crucifix, a shroud.

Shroud, what a beautiful word.

Anastomosis. Another favourite. Returning to bloodlines and the fleshy corporeality of metaphor. Anatomise, pull the skin back carefully, pull at the red threads, try to see how the flesh and muscle fits and bends around the bones and joints of the. What is the blood, what is the neurological system, the tendons, the ligaments, the soft tissue and cartilage.

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275 Montaigne, 'Of practice', in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, p.273.

A few times, instead of 'anastomosis', I wrote 'ana thrombosis' — which is the formation of a blood clot within an arterial vein. As it travels, it can get lodged in place, deprive parts of the body of oxygen. It can stop the heart, cause paralysis.

The aneurism, the embolism. The travelling stigmata.

Things stop us in our tracks. Break us down. Remind us of our vulnerable corporeality. Of the Introduction — Body — Conclusion, the *body* is by far most interesting. Strange soma, that mess of organs with its thin membrane.

Have you heard of 'anastomosis'? It refers to the reconnection of two streams that previously branched out from a single strand. In plants and animals, it is how veins merge with other veins through a system of tiny articulating connections. In medicine, it both saves and destroys lives, depending on whether the connection is desirable — if the vein, if the organic structure is viable, can sustain life. In geology, it happens in Quartz, causing shearing — also known as schisms, cleavage. In geography, it is a kind of stream or river that divides and reconnects, separated at points by material through which the water cannot migrate to other channels — thick mud, silt, rocks, etc. Analogous conduits of the self-same content. They separate, run parallel, wind, flow, and then merge again, into one.

You once said that in person I seemed *fragmented*. I thought it was a compliment, but I understand now that you meant most of the things I said didn't add up, couldn't be connected in a smooth line of conversation: the spaces between them were too big. I suppose that some leaps, connections, transitions can only be made on the page. No one really *speaks* in collage, do they?

De profundis. Saepe expugnaverunt me a juvetante mea!

From the depths. Those demons have attacked me from my youth onwards!

It is the twilight of my stay, already. Only two days left. I have spent time almost everywhere. My cell, where I read and write — sometimes, these letters. I have walked the hallways, eaten in the refectory, traversed the cloisters and paused where they meet in

the atrium, at the centre — stations of the cross. What is left? The oratory. The church. These I have been avoiding with some apprehension. It begins to seem like a kind of madness, the notion that I had to approach this building and its cycles of prayer with a kind of secular devotion. Submitting myself to the times and spaces of the Dominican day in absence of anything particular to pray to or invoke. I have only myself, and this writing.

Tomorrow, Sunday, I will go to mass in the church. I feel I ought to. Today there is an open Vespers — the office that acknowledges the day that has been spent, which traditionally took place at the hour when the Evening Star began to shine and when the lamp had to be lighted. *Lucernaria.* It is thanks for labour, and also anticipation of the rest that comes with night, and the eternal rest beyond. I'm not sure, ethically, that I can attend. It feels like an intrusion, a secular rubber-necking.

But I like the sound of it. *Lucernaria.* (Also a large, stalked deep-water species of jellyfish!).

Yours, as ever, from the watery depths,
Emily

"the exquisite prayer
to be new each day
brings to the artist
only a certain keenness"[276]

Private Devotion (a caricature of white).

The oratory is a room for individual prayer, an uninterrupted place to carry out holy meditations and devotions in private. It is engineered to sustain an enclosed space of peace and solitude, both physical and mental. Legacy of St. Dominic, there are different positions, different stances, postures and gestures that enable one to focus. They act as conduits by which one might gain access to something deeper. Or something higher. Yes, something higher.

Outstretched at full length on the ground.

Do you sometimes wish that you had an exoskeleton? Impervious to the outside world and its cruel weatherings. Though the immobility of a beetle, say, turned onto its back seems truly terrifying. If no one came along to flip you back over, to send you on your merry way, you would just lie there, arms and legs in the air, flailing. No food, no water. Waiting to die. At least you would have a good view of the sky. *Say thanks for the sky.* Perhaps, at the end of it all, such a view would be fitting. Upward. Inclined. Towards. After all, everything that is not earth *is* the sky. We walk, we talk, we daily move, we swim, we saunter through the sky. *Why should I feel lonely? Is not our planet in the Milky Way?*[277]

I had a doctor once, who said that to get rid of the trauma, I needed to recreate, exactly, the situation as it happened — I should adopt the same position, lying on my left side on the ground, with a blanket over my head, unable to move. He said that I should lie there and wait until it broke — whatever it was that was trapped inside of me. The evil feeling, maybe. Only then would it leave, only then would I be free. Otherwise it would stay deep within and slowly, but surely, kill me. I didn't do it. I was too afraid. And *seven hours* — well, who has the time!

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276 O'Hara, 'Ode to Michael Goldberg', in *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, p.297.

277 Henry David Thoreau, 'Solitude', in *Walden*, ed. by Joseph Wood Krutch (New York: Bantam, 1962), p.214.

The oratory is small room off of the visitors' library. It is a cube, a perfect cube, with a pyramid, a perfect pyramid that sits atop to form the roof. The slope, the ascent of the angles is extreme, so that if you look straight up, to the point of the point of the pyramid, there is a certain feeling of sheerness, not unlike vertigo. Or perhaps it is simply the angle of your neck — head thrown back. Try it. It pulls your mouth open slightly, widens your eyes — an involuntary sense of wonder. The pyramid has a single light well, a rectangular shaft by which a patch light moves slowly around the room, sunrise to sunset. An aperture, an eye, an I, tracing a careful geometry, a course of illumination — a sundial turned inside out.

Fix your eyes on the cross and genuflect, up to 100 times.

The eye, the I, that watches, all-knowing. How to remove the I? Cut it, slice it, gouge it, splice it, poke it, squeeze it right out. Press softly, then hard harder hardest — feel its sad, mushy orb move beneath your finger. *I look someone in the eyes: either the eyes are cast down – and this is modesty, that is, modesty for the emptiness lurking behind the gaze – or they look back at me. And they can look back at me shamelessly, thereby exhibiting their own emptiness as if there was another abyssal eye behind it that knows this emptiness and uses it as an impenetrable hiding place.*[278] Curl up inside the socket of the abyssal eye — round your shoulders — tight tighter tightest — make yourself as small as possible — grab the lashes to pull the lid closed — *shhh, she is asleep.*

Walking down the street one day, a man stopped to stare at me — mouth agape. He looked at me, stuck stock still in his tracks, and he stared, like a man turned to stone. I looked at him straight in the eyes, wondering what it was he saw. My face a Rorschach blot, a melancholy wager, a grinning bookie riddled with debts, a bad pun, a rumbling stomach, a dilated pupil — a gaping socket. Something wrong with me, something missing, something I *owe*. Or do we all just worry that someone can see through us? That we are about to be found out? The charlatan's ruse, her dissemblance, is just a fear of being human. Or is it that every person is a kind of emptiness, waiting to be filled?

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278 Giorgio Agamben, 'The Face', in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p.92.

The oratory has just one purpose, with just one focal point to attend it. There is a small crucifix on the wall just opposite the door of entry. To the right and left, in the corners, are long, thin slits of louvered windows. If they are open, and depending on the time day, the angle of the sun, long slashes of light fall across the space — brilliant incisions. The room has a feeling of balance, all things equal, symmetrical, in rhythmic proportion.

Face the altar with your hands out like an open book.

Hands. In my fever dreams the hands become very heavy. How heavy they are — they sink through the air like lead; the air that is equally ponderous in weight and viscosity. Each time I try to pick something up they fall and I fall after them, following their decline. Falling from the sky to the ground, a pair of dead doves.

Hands are important. *Palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.*[279] Van Gogh always painted them last, sometimes leaving them unfinished or blurry — abstracted versions of themselves. He believed the character of the hands revealed the character of the person. I think often of hands and the spaces between them — how they miss each other, hold, interlock, break apart. What creeps down them, through veins and arteries, onto the page beneath my hand when I write, pouring their chilled, ice white song — *sang* — royal blue — onto the page. I have never in my life seen another thing like Donatello's *Mary Magdalene*, the one made of wood. Wizened and searching, her eyes are fixed on a distant point and her hands, slender and neat, hover in near prayer, with just a sliver of air between. Held there forever, almost, but not quite, touching. The heat pulsing between them would feel incendiary. But if you tried to close the hands, they would break at the wrists. They require that space, slender nothingness, to exist. *Dieu a tout fait de rien. Mais le rien perce.*[280] The nothing pierces. And, conversely, I am pierced by nothing.

In the oratory, the centre of the room is the ideal place to stand. Although there are narrow benches to the left and right, against the walls, in case you need to sit down. From these vantage points, however, you would not be facing him — *you*, *him, he* — would not be facing, each other, face on. You, him, he — could not share upcast, downcast, gazes.

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279 William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, I.5.99.

280 Paul Valéry, *Œuvres II* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard; collection Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1960), p.907.

I once worked with an artist who made a film using puppets from a traditional theatre in Palermo. There was one puppet whose only purpose was to die a gory death in battle. He had been expressly crafted to fulfil only this role, alone. He had a hinged face. Even if he wanted, he could never be a normal puppet — because you would always be able to see the small hinge, just below his chin, and the latch in the middle of his forehead. The latch that was holding his face closed. Is it Plato who says that there comes a time when we change masks that we are without a face — a time that we are faceless?

We give faces to so many things. Faith, essentially, is an exercise in this. Outfitting the numinal with a countenance. But what happens when the face falls off? The Faith falls off, falls short, slipshod. Sheds, peels, sloughs — a skein of skin, a fence of flesh.

In the oratory, the crucifix is small and made of wood. If you walk up to it to look closely, you can see that the hands and feet — where the nails nail Him to the cross — have begun to break away. The wood is old, or the carving was perhaps inelegantly done in the first place — simplicity more important than craft or decorousness. But it makes the nails, the wounds seem that much more painful. Not only do they pierce, but then — after a time — the flesh begins to fall away, the body crumbles, insubstantial, and breaks off in chips, flakes, pieces.

Hold your hands up and apart at shoulder height.

For such is the terror, the poverty of corporeality. That which pierces reminds us that we are vulnerable — our skin a paper thin soma — our body something that can be broken, torn, rendered. That we bleed. Internally, externally. The stigmata is a wound that never heals — a wound that stays there, gaping and winking, or disappears and reappears at various times to mark those who bear it. See its sighing edges, like the slash of a Fontana. They curve in ever so slightly with the force of gravity — a wilting slice into the abyssal space beyond — and you see that there is always something to fall and fall and fall into. And something to fall *for*.

I have a pain in my hip that has lasted for months now. A dull ache, no matter what I do. Although walking helps. Walking, moving, rather that sitting, staying. In my dreams, awake and asleep, it is a travelling stigmata. A wound that migrates through my body, a

cyst or a growth. Clumps of hair. A few tiny teeth. It is hard as stone, with a terrible face, and it whispers to me — you, you, I know all about you. Sometimes its voice rises to a screech, and I worry that other people can hear.

In the oratory it is cold and dusky. The light well and the thin windows provide little by way of light. Though this is perhaps the intention. Like all of the other rooms, the oratory was built to fulfil a particular purpose, and all of its constructions, concrete constraints, aim to embody and to foster this as best possible. Private prayer, holy meditation.

Form a cross.

I would never survive as a friar, a monk, a nun. Too much agony, too much anguish. When I think about Mary, images from childhood churches, and then from Art History classes, the idea of shelter and protection, benediction, is full of allure. Though I don't subscribe to the binary, sinner and saint, Madonna and whore, I think I could only ever be a Magdalene, and never a mother. Our mother of sorrows, I would be lachrymose, dripping with sadness, and when I was finally gone my children would say that when they looked back at the shadowy images of me left in their minds, to try to find me — to understand, to sketch a sketch — they would say, everything else is clear but where she should be is just — is just — a blue stain, a cerulean bloom, a beautiful bruise.

I am not cut out for meditation — the darkness finds its way in so easily. Do I not possess the mental fortitude? I think about a character in a Roberto Bolaño story, 'Inside she could feel herself starting to scream, or rather, she could feel, and see, the dividing line between not-screaming and screaming. It was like opening your eyes in a cave bigger than the earth.'[281] Is it like the line between Faith and Faithlessness? Simone Weil wrote, 'whoever endures a moment of the void either receives a supernatural break or falls. It is a terrible risk, but one that must be run — even during the instant when hope fails'.[282] Perhaps I did not want to be well. Did I ever? Are we the way we are because or in spite of something? Was I always like this, and now I'm secretly relieved to have an excuse? I can remember almost everything, except the person that I used to be. I wish I could see

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281 Roberto Bolaño, 'Anne Moore's Life', in *Last Evenings on Earth*, trans. by Chris Andrews (New York: New Directions, 2006), p.94.

282 Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. by Arthur Wills (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1952), p.56.

into the cave behind me that is called she. Because all I know about her is that she was me. I wish that both of us, together and apart, were stronger.

In the oratory, there is the notional possibility of the threshold. The pause within the pause. The leap that allows one — through prayer, repetition, meditation — to be situated momentarily outside of oneself. *Indeterminacy*, 'a state of suspension within the precise meaning of the object, a consequence of the redefining of limits'.[283] The object in question here being belief. Belief suspended within the redefined limits of time, its passing, and the mind, the self, the soul within it. *A continual oscillation between extremes with bare stretches that taste like brass and leave the full flavour of emptiness.*[284] In the oratory, the light shifts and changes, reminding you that there are demarcations, denominations, within the infinitude of existence.

Form an arrow pointed into the sky.

I think that maybe someday all of these moments — each tiny gesture, the postures of prayer, the stations of the cross — will coalesce and sink until they fuse and begin to glow and rise. They will gain momentum to arc across the sky, burning bright and gold, exploding into nothing. And I will stand here on earth staring up as they disappear into ash gold filigree in the sky. Radiating out into the universe, where it will freeze and fall back in flakes in petals in ash grey ash gold ash white ash burned ash dust powder silt ash. And when they fall — the flakes — transubstantiation, transfiguration — I will stand here empty, with my expired beatitudes and supplications, and wonder at how dry seems the husk, the exoskeleton that now coils spirals loops and twists below, circling into the void. I will wonder at what, if anything, is left behind of any of us, and I will wish I had spent more time with her — little puppet. I will wish I had told her that it was okay, that it was alright, that life is both short and long and not much point to anything so to find joy wherever and whenever possible and not to think about it too much. To realise, finally, that you must learn to let some things die — to give up the ghost. And that this may be more difficult than hanging on, for dear life, but it is kinder than asking the invalid to live on interminably, limping and hobbling after you, dogged, indentured paces.

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283 Yago Conde, *Architecture of the Indeterminacy* (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2000), p.59.

284 Anaïs Nin, 'Preface', in Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p.xxxi.

In the oratory, the walls are white on white on white and everything is cold and bare. It is peaceful and full of silence, but the white seems a parody, a caricature of itself. I can see the dirt in the corners, the places where grubby hands have brushed against the walls. One of the window louvers has a broken handle. In the oratory, I wonder what all of the white is for, what it is supposed to cover — gouaches, washes, plasters, coats of paint. No frescoes to break the walls, but hardly any illumination, either.

But of course, white has no real rules or function, only those we attribute to it — like all other signs, symbols, icons, indications. Like most things in life. It is a possibility, it is a guideline, it is a direction — up, left, centre, stage — and never the thing in itself.

It isn't necessary that you leave home. Sit at your desk and listen. Don't even listen, just wait. Don't wait, be still and alone. The whole world will offer itself to you to be unmasked, it can do no other, it will writhe before you in ecstasy.

Franz Kafka, [aphorism 109]

Compline.

30 March.

Dear X.,

The idea, and not the thing in itself. No things but in ideas!

Is this the real purpose of collaboration? Do we, need we all aim at some sort of end, or can we be content to exist in the present moment, experiencing whatever unfolds there and then, without any desire for it to produce an object, an outcome, something neat, carefully and precisely tied — ribbon, bow, apple-pie-order.

And do we admit to ourselves when collaboration fails or simply doesn't accomplish what it set out to? Even the most brilliant ideas, the best-laid plans fall short — fall flat — splayed. Do we help them up, dust them off, and allow them to be who they are — clumsy and raw? Or do we instead, volte face, in view of having to admit to a sense of failure or disappointment, characterize them in rosy hindsight as 'luminous memories'?

He who remembers having been mistaken so many, many times in his own judgment, is he not a fool if he does not distrust it forever after? When I find myself convicted of false opinion by another man's reasoning, I do not so much learn what new things he has told me and this particular bit of ignorance – that would be small gain – as I learn my weakness in general, and the treachery of my understanding; whence I desire the reformation of the whole man.[285]

To relish the mistakes, to embrace the disappointments for what they can teach us, seems a rich thing to me: an acceptance of fundamental ignorance as a promise of eternal growth. This notion is a hallmark of Montaigne's essays and owes a debt to Humanist scholarship, which advocates for learning as a continual enrichment of the human mind and soul.

In any object or subject, I have always preferred the contradictions, the unravelled threads — tears in the fabric, the logic, the structure. One suspects an architect or an engineer might be less inclined, however, for fear that a loose thread would lead real, big, crushing things to crumble and fall, crashing definitively to the ground. Practically speaking, some forms have more at stake.

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285 Montaigne, 'Of experience', in *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, p.822.

Le Corbusier and Xenakis worked together on a number of projects. Whether this particular building, Le Couvent de la Tourette is a success or a failure depends on who you ask, what you read. As with most extreme aesthetics, the building has vehement supporters and detractors alike:

The building is in earnest, monasticism as an incarnation of the utopian lifestyle. The building is a mockery, a satire on the idea of the convent.

The building is Modernist. The building is Mannerist.

The building is an evolution of the traditional architecture of the convent. The building is a failure to understand the traditional architecture of the convent.

The building blends in, merges with its surroundings. The building stands out like a monolith, purposefully against its surroundings.

The building is passive. The building is aggressive.

The building should be attributed to Le Corbusier alone. The building should be attributed to Xenakis alone.

The idea of relative success or failure in each case is based on so many different sets of ideas, ideologies, ideologues — none of which seem particularly pertinent to me. I suppose it depends on your angle. But I think that we should judge projects by the terms they themselves put forward. Does the building achieve what it sets out to, are its intentions fulfilled on the grounds by which it purports to exist or to have been originally conceived?

For instance, many of Xenakis' musical compositions are technically difficult; some even include 'impossible elements'. For example, *Evryali* (1973) features a high C sharp that is off the keyboard. Instead of seeing this as a failure, a prohibition or a boundary, performers consider it a kind of Zen kōan: a paradoxical statement used as a meditation discipline to test one's doubt.

Of Architecture and La Tourette, Le Corbusier wrote the following: *Architecture begins with man. His relationships with his fellow men, the suprapersonal, corporate forms which he creates in conjunction with them and their position in relation to God – all this is embodied by the architect and his means. The result is a fruitful reciprocity. The grounds for the architectonic plan are found in the life and ideas of the men whom the building is intended to serve. Once it has been realised, the architecture strengthens and confirms the men and their basic communal institutions and helps them to find themselves.*[286]

On these grounds, La Tourette could be considered a successful collaboration. The building continues to function as a working friary, as well as a study centre for the architecture of Le Corbusier. But what of the collaboration between its makers? Xenakis is scarcely mentioned, save one of the smallest study rooms named after him. I wonder if he has been written out deliberately, 'little stranger', or if this place and its history has simply taken on a life of its own.

Sometimes I think that the ultimate collaboration is between author and audience — navigating what we want, what we expect from somebody or something, and what they are able to give us in reality. The idea versus what we end up with. Collaboration is the desire to tread that fine line — arms outstretched to either side — one foot carefully in front of the other. In her novel, *Speedboat*, Renata Adler's protagonist states, 'I don't think much of writers in whom nothing is at risk'. [287] I would like to say the same of all creative practitioners. Why do anything at all, if you are content with what you already know? Why not get a factory job, toil away on an assembly line, put together that safe, easy product, earn a tidy profit? If we remember, always, how very much we do not know, the world becomes a terrifying but also an infinitely bounteous place.

I like to think of the essay as a collaboration: a piece of writing that absorbs the constitutive properties — the form and structure — of its object or subject. Not with the purpose of reflection or imitation, but — through writing, an adjacent form — a portrait of the attempt to gain understanding. You will again notice my emphasis on *attempting* rather than the *gaining*. The essay is made to make you understand its making — to

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286 Le Corbusier, as cited in Anton Henze, *La Tourette: the Le Corbusier monastery*, trans. by Janet Seligman (London: Lund Humphries, 1966), p.9,

287 Renata Adler, *Speedboat* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2013), p.62,

remember that, at any moment, it may be *unmade*. The coherent is a creative conceit, and each essay is newly inconsistent — a rebellion against aesthetic unity.

If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.[288]

And what of *my* collaboration with La Tourette — will it be successful?

The essay is too personal. The essay is not personal enough.

The essay is a truth. The essay is a lie.

The essay says everything. The essay says nothing.

The essay explains what a place, a space can hold. The essay misunderstands the notion of proportion.

The essay favours Le Corbusier. The essay favours Xenakis.

The essay is a short story. The essay is a poem.

The essay thinks that buildings stay the same, that things can be preserved for all time — set in stone. The essay thinks that nothing lasts — it bumps into everything, breaks all of the windows, wrenches the fixtures.

The implication being that there is a perfect essay that hovers somewhere in between, elegantly straddles all of these things.

My stay has been full of contradictions. Not least the question of how to behave in a place constructed for religious prayer, worship, and learning, if you don't believe in God. I have been surprised to find that I have an unshakeable belief in prayer; I fall readily, easily on my knees in reverence. The language of religious supplication seeps into my prose, suffuses the pages with *I implore* and *please* and *my soul* and *please*, again, *oh please*. But the swoon, the intensity of feeling comes from the absence rather than the presence of

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288 Rene Descartes, *Discourse on the Method and the Meditations*, trans. by John Veitch (New York: Cosimo, 2008), p. 73.

benediction. It is the gesture, it is the repetition, it is not the reality but the *possibility* of a deep devotion that closes the space between my palms. Is this what they mean when they refer to a state of grace? The search for form?

Perhaps you will find it strange that I have cottoned on to the notion of the religious, when the convent today is more commonly a site of architectural pilgrimage. But it's the two in concert, aiming together at a notion of the sacred, that seizes me. It is how everything comes together, and how I will explain this to you, that evades me, even with my eyes upturned. What we might, I suppose, call *reverence*.

So writing involves a dashing back and forth between that darkening room where facticity is strewn and a windowless room cleared of everything I do not know. It is the clearing that takes time. It is the clearing that is a mystery.[289]

I remember you told me that I was always seeing metaphors where they don't exist. But during my time here at La Tourette, I have felt real, deep parallels, threads running on an even plane between my individual, creative, and intellectual understanding of the project at hand. That is to say — the building, as well as my interest in its relationship to the essay.

The connections are hard to pin down, but I know they are there: just a matter of faith. At least I think I do. The mind, the essay plays tricks. It easily allows for contradictions in logic and reason. How simple to write something; how difficult for it to be true. For instance, I have said that I prefer the greys, the unknowns, the impalpables. And yet this trip has been fuelled by an assumption that my arrival would be a kind of *arrival*: all of the things that I had been unsure of, in writing, in architecture, in practice, in theory, would settle into place. Through meditation and contemplation — the sheer effort of the mind — I would become a conduit for the truth of forms and structures, their alchemies and promises, all of the things they hold onto, hold fast and slow.

And it hasn't — arrived. And I haven't — formed a conduit of truth.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final.[290]

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289 Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost: Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p.vii.

At times, it feels a little disgusting to me. My cloying advances, bared and bald-faced approaches, long walks down the austere corridors, in the hills, back and forth across the cloisters. My sincerity and hope feels naïve and excessive. It wavers and waffles against these white walls that uphold scholasticism, poverty, chastity, devotion, selflessness. Such is the paradox: the belief in a single truth causes us to doubt everything. I begin to imagine the priests can tell, just by looking at me, that these faults are deep within me: wanton excess of desire, weakness of resolve.

Please — here — I just want to be close — I would even — let me just — wash your feet even — with my hair even — for a moment — only — just a moment — even.

They walk past me in the refectory in the morning, where I drink coffee and write. We see you, their looks seem to say: we *see* you. And we see right through to the other side. We've got your number. You have been filling this place with yourself and there is *no room*! You don't know what you are doing here: *Imposter*. You don't know anything at all.

You're right! I think. I don't know. Even my own metaphors conspire to abase me.

And suspicion is a net that casts itself wide. The truth is, it is *I* who feel suspicious of my idealism; much the way my happiness is suspicious of itself — never quite believing its aims and bents to be possible, within reach. *The spectre of Happiness*. I can feel, but I cannot see the conditions that might be necessary to bring it into being. The truth is, the friars probably don't care — why I'm here, what I'm doing, scribbling away in these pages. The truth is, they probably don't notice me at all.

If one were to live by a law of contradictions, it would mean that a thing is always, eventually, met by its opposing force. If, that is you, can hold out for long enough.

*The humiliations and defeats, given with a primitive honesty, end not in frustration, despair, or futility, but in hunger, an ecstatic, devouring hunger – **for more life**.*[291]

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290 Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Go to the Limits of Your Longing', in *Rilke's Book of Hours* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), p.88.

291 Nin, p. xxxii.

I don't mind waiting. I'm here, aren't I? What else is there to do. And meanwhile, I have these letters to you to pass the time.

The spectre of happiness! What a thing to say. But we all do our time in the barrel. Circling the drain. And you know those dark, evil days, don't you? With their grey-eye-balling skies and the sense of an unholy distance, a cool, sharp twist in the chest. As though someone is pulling, endlessly pulling, the blade of a knife out of your heart.

Yesterday, I went to the Oratory — ORATOIRE, it says in plain white letters on the yellow door. The small space intended for uninterrupted, private prayer. I'm not sure what I thought I would do there, but it seemed like a good place to think. Quiet and calm on a day when nothing seemed to make much sense, and all of my work so far felt like a foolish indulgence, the scribblings of a madwoman, waste and detritus in triplicate.

Father
Son
Holy Ghost

I sat outside of the Holy Trinity, waiting for it to extend itself to me — to give me a coordinate. But the geometry did not lengthen or cede, it did not increase to meet me.

I am only a man: I need visible signs.
I tire easily, building the stairway of abstraction.
Many a time I asked, you know it well, that the statue in the church
lift its hand only once, just once, for me.[292]

I sat. I waited. I sat and waited in any case. Just in case. Believing that whatever thoughts visited me might be considered useful in some way. Elicited by and reflected in my immediate surroundings. It was an essay — a test — a tenderness — a vulnerability. Open your mind, allow the thoughts to rush over you — the ones you hate, the ones you love. The ones that inspire and buoy, the ones that shake you to the centre of your dark core.

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292 Czeslaw Milosz,'Veni Creator', in *Collected Poems 1931-2001* (London: Penguin, 2005), p.223.

Push against the holes, see if they will hold your weight. Smooth your fingers over the raised scars, remind yourself of the pliant resilience of flesh. Stand on the spot and try to outrun the darkness. Without meaning to utter a sound, hear yourself whisper, feel yourself implore: to you, everything I bestow.

What the enemies of modern art, with a better instinct than its anxious apologists, call its negativity, is the epitome of what established culture has repressed and that toward which art is drawn.[293]

Prosopopeia is 'the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity which posts the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech'.[294] In the Iconoclastic wars of the 16th century, it was a common barb to accuse something of being a 'dead image', to say that those who invest their hope in images 'do not have a living faith but a dead one'.[295]

I have never believed images to be alive.

To engage with something — even a blankness — is to remind ourselves of the ability to *generate* life — an inner life — of the mind, heart, and dare I say, *soul*. We create our own meaning. A bleak truth that forces us to accept none is naturally occurring. But a liberty — *egalité*, *fraternité* — alike, and a great responsibility. *We create our own meaning.* This is a notion of engagement that also posits a critical awareness about the possibility of making meaning of someone else's making of meaning — about the value of endeavouring to do so. *Only connect.* I do not expect an image, an object, this convent, to respond to me as if *it* is alive, as if it has something to say. I expect it to remind me that *I* am alive, that I have something to say.

Might we consider writing about art as a form of image devotion? So there you have it, I have no shame, I am a worshipper. But if I am waiting for the image to speak, that means we are in dialogue. We share a space — the hole between conception and execution, wanting and having, knowing and not knowing, form and function. It is in this

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293 Theodor Adorno, 'Situation', in *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.27.

294 Amy Powell, *Depositions: Scenes from the Late Medieval Church and the Modern Museum* (New York: Zone Books, 2012), p.106.

295 Ibid., p.107.

enclosure, this place of *absorption*, that the real alchemy of collaboration flourishes. We see that it is possible to *extract honey from rock and oil from stoniest ground.*[296]

The divine possibilities of metaphor. The intimacy of greys. Words as sfumato, as grisaille. It is possible for words to extract the life from objects so that they may enter the province of language. As such, this letter — every letter — is a beautiful corpse. Perhaps the unnatural pallor alarms you. Perhaps, in some places, you find it *distasteful* that an entire page is taken up by a wound, as in some of those 14th century Books of Hours — the *Psalter* or the *Hours of Bonne de Luxembourg.*[297] Do you doubt?, the wound asks, snagging the gaze.

Of his white paintings, Robert Rauschenberg wrote, *they are large white (1 white as 1 GOD) canvases organized and selected with the experience of time and presented with the innocence of a virgin. Dealing with the suspense, excitement, and body of an organic silence, the restriction and freedom of absence, the plastic fullness of nothing, the point a circle begins and ends. They are a natural response to the current pressures of the faithless and a promoter of intuitional optimism. It is completely irrelevant that I am making them – **Today** is their creator.*[298]

TODAY is their creator. In this hole, in this void — I am gratefully absorbed.

TODAY we changed the clocks — spring forward, fall back. It is Sunday. I leave tomorrow. Today I will go to mass, at 11am, just to see what it is like. Though I must admit I feel a sense of dread and unease: I have become so accustomed to my own idiosyncratic, secular adulations, perambulations of the rooms here, that part of me is afraid to submit myself to their *actual* functions.

It will be a fitting end to my time here, in any case. Sunday Mass. The end of the cycle of prayers, *Compline*. The edge of the darkness, just as it begins. The edge, the break, the bend, the refract. *Finisterre*. Why not look over, see what's down there?

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296 Deuteronomy 32.13.

297 Powell, p.179.

298 Robert Rauschenberg, as cited in Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"* (London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 157.

Yours, TODAY, and always,

Emily

We have a soul that can turn to itself, it can keep itself company, it can attack and defend, receive and give away.[299]

Memory Work (terza rima).

I once spoke with a friend who said, 'if you think that writing will save you from something, well – it won't. It won't, it doesn't save you, it doesn't make things better. In fact, sometimes, it just makes things worse.'

I wasn't sure what I thought — if I agreed or not — so I looked out the window in silence.

We had the conversation in a car, driving from Montreal to Toronto. The night before, there had been a huge thunderstorm. As we drove, we passed, lined up along the side of the road, a number of dead animals — dogs, raccoons, rabbits, a fox, a deer. I stared in confusion — in my imagination there rose the illusion that they had somehow been *summoned* there, to the edge of the road, and struck dead upon arrival — some kind of sacrifice, a storm ceremony of death. Animal mourners of the tempest, lining the early morning carriageway. A night's offering of corpses — *après moi le déluge*. 'Why are they here?', I asked. 'What is this?'

My friend pointed out that the animals must have been startled and disoriented by the storm and run out into the road where they were hit by passing vehicles.

'But why are they at the *side*, then, at *the edge* instead of in the middle?', I asked. 'Did someone move them there, drag them across the road to lie there in peace?'

He looked at me. 'Well, Emily', he said, 'the force of the collision, would have thrown them there, I would think. I doubt anyone was out here in the dark lining up the dead bodies of animals like some sort of ritual, if that is what you are imagining'.

'No, no I wasn't', I lied. 'I was just — I was just *wondering*'.

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299 Montaigne, 'Of solitude', in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, p.177.

We don't speak anymore — this friend and I. It's hard to say that I miss *him*, since by the time our relationship ended, I felt he had become someone else entirely — someone I did not recognise, did not know at all. We forget, or simply don't understand, until it happens, and then until it is too late to fix, that this *is* getting to know people. Understanding the misunderstandings. Learning to be humane about the trifling humanness of humanity. And but so — *we beat on, boats against the current.*[300] I do not miss him, but I do miss these conversations. His logic, his calm rationality countering my darkness, so often tinged with fear and just a hint of magical thinking.

Though — looking back on it — what he said about writing and salvation, for better or for worse, well, he wasn't entirely wrong. But he wasn't entirely right, either.

Writing — like most creative endeavours — lies somewhere in between. In between the struggle and salvation, the better and the worse. The elation and the despondence. In between, because it is a line and not a point, a process and not a destination: wavering, surging, uncontainable, infinite. Ebb and flow. You need to go down to come up. The essay gives, the essay takes. Ask and ye shall receive.

It is possible, too, that I don't actually *need* these conversations any longer, finding my own mind to be sufficient, if sometimes tortuous company. I tire of extremes, and feel reluctant to use them to characterise myself or others. The outer reaches of extremes are dangerous, they teach you things that it is dangerous to believe — for instance, that because something is fallible, it is untrue. I want to learn to locate myself somewhere in between: *Zwischenwelt*. On the horizon. In the middle of the riddle. And why not. Why not allow yourself to be pierced by everything *and* nothing. Contradiction isn't the same as inconsistency.

and no one can gaze on her without vertigo
and time has charged her with eternity.
And to think that she wouldn't exist
except for those fragile instruments, the eyes.[301]

The church service began at 11am. Though I have spent time here at various points during my stay, it is different now, filled with people. Families that seem to know each

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300 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.141.

301 Jorge Luis Borges, 'History of the Night', in *Selected Poems: Volume 2* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.393.

other nod in greeting, faint smiles. The space feels less imposing, more welcoming, and there are those who — like me — are here for the architecture, for the experience of space rather than religiosity. We look around in awe — up at the ceiling so high above, the sheer stretch of concrete walls, the thin slits of horizontal windows that throw light cautiously hued by the painted walls off of which it reflects. No one seems terrified or imposed upon, as I have been feeling, and I am reminded that every interpretation of something is just that. We must be careful of our eyes and our I's — all of the things they betray.

The nave is influenced by the halls of the mendicant orders of the Middle Ages, which bring together two different liturgical communities into relationship with one altar. The altar — Christ — rises at the centre of the space: monks approach from the west, laypeople from the east. Now, we are all combined — sitting in the pews together, facing inward to the priest that leads the mass.

No sign of Barbara, though I am sure she is still here. On her door, the dates of her stay indicate that she will remain for even a week longer. Perhaps she is not religious? Though nor am I, and here I sit in contemplation in any case. I remember the other churches that stand out in my mind.

The sugar crystal white promise of a church in San Diego, which turned out to be dark with low ceilings and shag carpets, and filled with eager Latter-day Saints.

The church in Basel that I went into one day when I was feeling especially low. There had been a choir singing, and its soaring, lifting compositions, its inspires and high spires rooted to the spot. I asked to go up to the tower, to see the view, and they said no — you must have someone with you, a partner or a friend, a stranger, even, because someone once jumped.

The church at Dachau. A latter-day construction that I couldn't understand how to read, just as I couldn't understand how to read the site itself — what remained — what had been imposed at a later date. The behaviour of others, and my own, too. There, where it seemed to me to be terrifying what places both hold and don't hold. A large group of school children ran around in glee, laughing hysterically, pushing each other, adolescent

flirting, skipping and running through the rows of buildings. The sun was brilliant, a cloudless sky. Away from the main complex, one of the only public toilets was in a small room at the back of the gas chamber building. I cried when the lock stuck, and felt profoundly embarrassed by everything about myself.

Someone asked my why I would ever go there, why you would ever visit Dachau. Because it exists, I said, without thinking. Because it exists and it's the least I can fucking do. Ineloquent and plain, but true. The feeling of duty is a strange thing to negotiate — responsbility — respect. To understand that there are things you will never understand, and what that means. For instance, on the page and in my mind, there exists no transition from the church at Dachau to whatever I will write next that will not feel — to me, perhaps to anyone — paltry, glib, and stupid. Even this is a humiliating thing to say, it is so ordinary.

Even this makes me wonder, if I am so afraid of words — so sceptical and condescending — what right have I to use them at all, to claim the capacity, the vocation of 'writer'? *You are locked in a most savage and terrible ignorance.* Do words fail me, or do I fail words? *No matter. Try again. Fail better. Fail worse.*[302] We must respect the things that we employ, even if they are full of constitutional errors and poverties. For the simple reason that we are, too. And no one likes a hypocrite. But also because, if the essay has taught me anything at all, it is that the attempt itself is the success: an endorsement of the most essential intangibilities, those that seem to equal freedom in mind and body alike — sensibility, sympathy, empathy, resemblance, desire. We hold them in our hands, turn them over and over, this way and that. See the angles and shapes, how the light shines. And, if nothing else, it is — at least — a way to pass the time. For instance — writing this has been a kind of hell, but it has taken much longer than seven hours.

Would we be fools to believe that if form can break your heart, then structure can put it back together? Or would we simply be lovers — amorous, amatory, *amateur* — as in — for the *love of it*. 'Can be confused with armature', my dictionary says. But of course, like structure, you can hang a great many things on love. And it will hold them, for a while at least, as long as you are prepared for the tolls of gravity.

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302 Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, in *Company / Ill Seen Ill Said / Worstward Ho / Stirring Still* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p.81.

*I did not love **it**, I loved its burning down and, you know, I haven't loved anything since.*[303]

In the church, my mind wanders. The mass is in French, and while my language skills have improved rapidly during my stay, much of it remains a mystery to me. I look around at the space, stare upwards, to the striking concrete flat above. I think about the wall across from me, its stone cold, and wonder what would happen if the whole room began to turn like a cube on an axis. The wall becomes the floor, exercises in perspective. All of a sudden I imagined I could feel the room begin to tilt and topple, launching me forward to land heavily on the giant expanse, the rough surface scratching my face, my skin. I would only have to get to the middle, to a safe place where I could stop and lie securely, where I could wait until all of the waters and weeds of memory receded and if I tried hard enough I could sink and rise, rise and sink through the floor. *Flayed Earth/Flayed Self (Skin/Sink).*[304]

And then, after all of the planes and solidities, liquids, winds, and arborescences had fused into one — through the wall, the ceiling, the floor — then — then — I would get up and walk away and leave her there. The sunken figure, the shadowy impression. But first, I would embrace her from behind and whisper, softly, 'I'm sorry, I have to leave now — I'm not sure when — if — I will be back. But you, you can go on without me. You must'. It would be hard for me to say, and perhaps even harder for her to hear, but we would both understand the necessity. It is too easy to become accustomed, to fall in love, share the same skin with the richness of a certain kind of despair. And if you so much as blink, it will swallow you whole.

Now you can tell how great
must be the love
that burns in me when it escapes my mind that we are empty
and I treat shade as a solid thing.[305]

Stations of the Cross. There are fourteen. Of which seven are usually depicted in artistic representations. Stations of the Cross. The Way of the Cross. Via Crucis. Via Dolorosa. Way of Sorrows. Or sometimes simply The Way.

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303 Paul Celan, 'Conversations in the Mountains', in *Paul Celan, selections*, ed. by Pierre Joris (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), p.152.

304 Bruce Nauman, *Flayed Earth/Flayed Self (Skin/Sink*), (Los Angeles: Nicholas Wilder Gallery, 1974)

305 Alighieri Dante, 'Purgatorio', in *The Divine Comedy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1948), p.59.

I admire the church here, with its absence of religious iconography. No stained glass illustrations of the stations, scenes from the bible, saints' lives. There is a simple iron cross to the North side of the central altar and, behind it, a small altar with a small crucifix, at which to participate in moments of private prayer. All else is simple lines — stretches of concrete with few interruptions, save a narrow stretch of windows here and there: Xenakis' famous designs, 'machine guns' (long horizontal slits) and 'light cannons' (three conical light wells that shine into the lower crypt) that shine into the 'listening ear' of the church, the lower crypt that is so visible from the approach to the convent. The emphasis is on simplicity, poverty — crude, unabashed surfaces of things as they exist. Maybe you don't need to see very much to believe, after all. Maybe you only need to touch, to feel — texture.

Ouvre mes yeux, Seigneur Jésus, je verrai ta Gloire! Par le Baptême de ta Mort, Tu es notre Vie: c'est Jésus, le Messie, qui met la boue sur mes yeux. C'est lui qui m'appelle.

The words lift and swell in the air, a sonourous flush within its cavernous contours. The priest who has been leading mass is now seated, and another has taken his place. It is this man's voice that sounds, leading the congreation in a call and answer song cycle. I look down at my song sheet, 'Choral de l'Aveugle-né', which means Song of the Born Blind. It is a song of praise and thanks to the Lord for the blindness that has been bestowed upon the singer. I mean literal blindness, like no eyes — no I's. It takes me a moment to realise the perversity of the lyrics, the extreme nature of faith that some contexts demand. Because the man's voice is beautiful and clear. And I find myself singing along, my voice rising as in the choirs I sang as a child — open your mouth wide, elocution, keep the vocal chords free, wide, unimpeded so that the song may come forth clearly, rising up from deep within the body, the diaphragm. Adopt the posture, and the meaning will follow. I find myself singing eagerly, ignoring the words in favour of joining my voice — even momentarily — with that of others.

Wind, you'll have a terrible time
smothering my clarity, a void
behind my eyes,
into which existence
continues to stuff its wounded limbs
as I make room for them, on one
after another filthy page of poetry.[306]

306 Frank O'Hara, 'To Hell with It', in *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, p.276-277.

I was almost late for this service — of the Born Blind, L'Aveugle-né.

I rose early so that I would have time to wander the grounds of the convent before mass. I have grown familiar with the woods, the twists and turns of their paths, steep ascending and descending slopes that take you by surprise. I was determined to find the 'ruins' that I had been unable to locate since my arrival. The ruins with their strange names — *temple d'amour*, *les batîments*, *la sourcière*. Each day I had walked in the woods, diligently criss-crossing every path, swivelling my head, squinting into the leaves and rocks: I thought that I had been everywhere, but still, no ruins. This time, I drew a map of the map, with its sketchy outlines and walking paths, and carefully marked in RED where, exactly, the ruins were supposed to be. I had to laugh, crunching through the undergrowth, when I realised I had been walking past them every day without noticing. Where I had expected the ruins to be grand and impressive pieces of decay, they were, in reality, just small piles of rocks, nearly indistinguishable from the earth and generally unkempt land that stretched between the paths. *Temple d'Amour*, The Temple of Love, was the most impressive of the bunch. A small, square foundation of rocks at the western edge of the woods. I scrambled through the bushes towards it. 'Well, there you have it', I heard myself say aloud. I laughed in surprise, but it came out short and hard, like a gasp. Was I disappointed? Did I expect a ruined temple of love to look like something *other than* this shitty heap of rocks with its sad foundations, crumbled beyond repair? I sat down heavily on one corner of the temple. I reached down to pick up a small stone from the ground, one with a sharp point, and carved my initials into the foundation beneath me: EL. Only the rock of the temple — *the rock of love* — was so uneven, worn away in deep bumps and grooves, that it was hard to manage any straight lines. I messed up the E, and its lowest rung looked as though it had been kicked upwards — a pelvis at an uneven, rakish tilt; off balance, pain in the hip. The travelling wound with its horrible face looked up at me and laughed.

How many times had I walked past this ruin and believed it to be nothing, to mean nothing at all? How hard do you have to look before you can see what has been right in front of your face the whole time? Three times? Deny thrice? And then weep in repentance for foolish ignominy and absence of faith? Perhaps faith is learning to accept that what we imagine is often far from the reality; learning how to close the gap between the two in a way that doesn't feel like an existential disappointment, an eternal

compromise. Perhaps it takes multiple attendants and attendances — hail, hail hail — *visitatio sepulchri*. Waiting for the host. Looking for what is interred, deep within the mausoleum of the self. Learning to see things as they are; learning to be grateful, even when what we see is ugly or frightening. *Life is usually stronger than people's love for it.*[307] To learn that the ordinary violence of living does not need to end in its extinguishment. For the truth is, we can bear more than we know. And of course, the obvious platitude, if we don't try, we will never know what lies on the other side of this bearing — bearing down — bearing up — bear it away. *Forbearance.*

I walked on, past another 'ruin' — *les batîments* — two lines of stone, one on either side of the path. I paused for a moment to balance on and walk down each, a commemoration, a reassurance that I had come and seen and conquered. I had vanquished all of the ruins. My last stop, the crowning jewel, was to be a body of water that lay at the far reaches of the woods. Out past the trees I walked further and further, through tall grass filled with sharp thistles, which slowly turned into a bog, but at that point it was too late to turn back, even if I had wanted to. There was something satisfying, anyways, about the soft ground beneath my feet and the extra effort it took to move, each footfall sinking in to leave a print behind, the wet, earthy smell. I climbed over a low, broken fence and there it was, a large pond — the water still, no one in sight. I walked to its edge, where there stood — sheltered beneath a copse of trees — a three-walled wooden shelter. Inside the shelter was a table and a bench, and on the table was a metal pitcher and a single, empty glass. I sat down and turned my head to press my cheek against the rough, weathered wood of the wall. I wondered who came here to think, to be alone.

All week I had been thinking about prayer, and one in particular. *Ecce nunc benedicte Dominum* – 'It is for you to continue to bless the Lord'. How easy it would be to turn it into a secular prayer, simply by removing the Lord: *It is for you to continue to bless.* I liked the idea of a prayer to nothingness: invoke the nothing, the absence, and beg it to breathe into you, exhaling absolution. Feel it whisper through the marrow of your bones, a murmuration. When the three Marys visit Christ's tomb on Easter to find that he is risen, they are asked: *Quem quearatis?* 'Whom do you seek?' Just a few letters difference and you could instead ask *What do you seek?* – Quod querantis? All of these questions and

307 Adam Philips, 'Fears', in *Terrors and Experts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 51.

commands reminded me of the essayists and the poets and the philosophers — for the queries and desires are not so dissimilar. Montaigne with his weighing scales, balance in flux, an embodiment of the dictum that presided over his work: *Que sais je?* What do I know? All of the great thinkers who have negotiated the line between mind and body, thought and experience. *Cogito ergo sum* — I think therefore I am. *Parfois je pense, parfois je suis* — Sometimes I think, sometimes I am.[308]

What do I know? A question is a promise, a pact — by virtue of the possibility its utterance brings into being. Half of an equation, dare to complete me, it says: meet me in the middle, at the edge of what you think you know. Meet me in the middle, at the centre, at the heart of the heart, and we will listen to hear if there is a pulse yet, and can you hear it, we will ask, together — creaking, aching, breaking into life. Inside the question mark, curled in its tail, pinned in its point, lives the promise of something unborn. And promises are alluring, even when we know them to be false.

All of a sudden I realised the time, and that I would be late for mass. Hurrying back to the convent, I decided take a 'shortcut' that eventually involved climbing over a barbed wire fence, wading through yet another bog, and finally ending in a near sprint up a steep hill. So that when I arrived at church, it was with muddy shoes and a not inconspicuous tear in the left leg of my trousers. *Que sais je – Quod querantis*, I whispered to myself, as I slid into a pew.

There is this cave
In the air behind my body
That nobody is going to touch:
A cloister, a silence
Closing around a blossom of fire.
When I stand upright in the wind,
My bones turn to dark emeralds.[309]

In the church, the mass seems to go on forever. It's cold and the pews are uncomfortable. Yes — I had forgotten about this part of religion, the actual practise. No wonder Barbara didn't come. If you weren't religious, why would you bother?

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308 Valéry, p.218.

309 James Wright, 'The Jewel', in *The Branch Will Not Break* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), p.17.

I keep looking at the hard concrete floor. Apparently the spaces were designed to accommodate, in each open area, the length and width of two bodies lying on the ground — a position that is favoured by the Dominicans for prayer. All I can think about is how *cold* it would be. Cold and hard. And I can't remember from any of my readings — would they lie face up or face down? Face down, I should think. Arms stretched out to the sides.

The other day, I stood in the atrium — the small area where the arms of the cloisters meet, the centre of the X. I tried to imagine it as a confluence of all of the forces, positive and negative, that have been coursing through me during this visit. All of my worries about the building, its architecture and engineering, its architects and engineers. My writing, writing in general, my life, life in general: worries, fears, all of the things that nag and plague, good and bad habits, what defines us as people. And on and on and on. I stood in the atrium, with the sun shining through the musical windows around me, angles and striations refracted across the floor, a song of shattered, scattered light.

I stood and I waited. For what? I'm not sure. For the silence, for the tender white pause to arrive? The pause that I was always trying to stretch into infinity, like time was a vehicle and space was a concrete materiality by which to understand the properties and perspectives of solitude.

I waited for the green to fill my heart until it burst forth branches that would bend but not break and I would stand there rooted to the spot — arms in the air, waving but not drowning — as the arborescences reached above me, tunnelling upwards through the concrete confines, breaking the structure to propose something new — something free, something where you could feel the wind instead of just see it. I wanted to feel it — the green and the wind. I wanted to meet it in the bone of the bone of the grass, in the middle of the earth, the soft marrow, deep delicacy, fertile nourishment.

And the deep fear, the bone grass, bone marrow fear set in that what had happened in my life, both specifically and generally, did not make me different or special at all. I felt that perhaps I clung to it out of fear, as if the extremes, the difficulties are the only things that have the power to make us what we are. That without them, on our own, we are nothing at all: words floating around without a sentence. Maybe I had been looking for a

life sentence, grasping at the dark hole in front of me as if it was solid and permanent, even if that meant embracing a kind of intractable sadness and solitude. Was it easier to believe that I had been robbed of something than that the voids I felt were — would always be, had always been — things that I needed to fill myself? All this time I had been clinging to the endless allure of the before, thinking it in direct correlation to the after — *Ça me perce — I am marked — noli me tangere.* As though the point at which the former became the latter was the central point around which all things orbited, and I was destined to remain there at the core, fixed in place. And I sat there, in that core, frozen and terrified, but with an easy explanation for all of the dark moments, the hardships, the pains — the very real bleaknesses of life. Perhaps it *was* a reasonable explanation — knowing things that you can't un-know, can't un-see, un-learn. But it occludes, it tinges, it distorts, and all of the light departs: the light waits for no one.

Was this why I gave everything away so freely? If I kept, lodged at the centre of my self, this secret darkness, this feeling of being wrong and *wronged* and *something wrong with me* — then no other disclosure was private or shameful, there was nothing to confess.

Strange to think such a thing when I feel I know I would say to anyone, objectively — friend or foe — that no disclosure *is* shameful. If something happened, it happened: for something to exist, its existence must be possible. So why feel sad, bad, mad, dangerous to know? But sometimes we are made to feel differently; or sometimes, we just do.

We learn to ignore how very wide, how vast is the scale of possibility. It's a kind of survival, but it's a kind of cowardice, too. One that rots, one that steals, real deep theft, with impunity. Cloistered, smug, and afraid, hoarding its goods with fierce avarice.

Was it a gift, then, no matter how hard won, to have been afforded a wider view? A veritable panorama! If I could just shake my addiction to feeling misunderstood. If I could say thanks for the sky. If I could wait for the host without worrying about having the right words to receive it. If I could see all of this as a choice rather than a pathology.

Ecce nunct benedicte. I'm working on it.

I thought I saw a black sun in the deserted sky and a red ball of blood over the Tuileries. I said to myself: 'The eternal night begins, and it will be terrible. What will happen when the people realise there is no longer a sun?'[310]

I stayed on, after the service had ended. After the congregation filed out, and the friars too — I stayed in the pew, keeping my eyes downturned, pretending I was carrying out a personal meditation of some sort so I wouldn't have to speak to anyone. I wanted to feel the space emptied of people and filled with my thoughts. Filled with myself — the ego — the I. The body, yes, the Host.

At the end of the mass, together we had intoned — *mon Seigneur, mon Seigneur* — and moved from the pews to the other side of the altar, where we stood for the blessing of the sacrament, the peace-be-with-yous, and the distribution of the host. I remembered easily, this time, to receive it with an *Amen* — though during the Hail Mary, trying to say it English, but in time with the French, I accidentally said, 'lead us to temptation and deliver us not from evil'. I felt a slight twist of guilt — not that I would have believed the inverse any more or less. How exhilarating that words so easily combine and recombine — meaning, leaning, by accident, helter-skelter, at just a slight misstep or alteration. Mikhail Bakhtin writes, 'the act of writing fills the gap between self and other through language. Writing is, within this paradigm, essentially affirmative; it implies the possibility of transcending one's own subjectivity, of escaping the solipsism of the self through language'.[311] But what about the solipsism of language?

It seems to me that the gap, the nothing-in-between, the tension — chaos/order, harmony/discord, interior/exterior (etc. etc.) — to walk the tightrope over the abyss, like Nietzsche said, the thin line between all of the binaries, is the thing. Look down, look up, look side-to-side and forward, feel it bow and shake beneath you: and *keep walking*. Is this the ultimate wager, then? To defy gravity, and thereby attain grace?

But maybe it's an orbital, instead of a straight line. And, as Oscar Wilde wrote, 'who can calculate the orbit of his own soul?'[312] A dizzying notion. Do we attempt with forms of art? To trace the looping eccentricities of the self and the forms they inhabit? Do certain

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310 Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia and Other Writings* (Chicago: Exact Change, 1996), p.49.

311 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryle Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press), p.354.

312 Oscar Wilde, *Epigrams of Oscar Wilde* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2007), p.121.

forms accord more directly to certain subjects, do they share characteristics, reflect back and forth across disciplines in a mise-en-abîme? That we have rhyming schemes seems essential to me. *Terza rima*, for instance, the interlocking three-line rhyming scheme that Dante used in *Divina Commedia* and in *Inferno*, in the passage down to hell. Influenced by the lyrics of the Provençal troubadours, and also the Holy Trinity. There is a rhythm, there is a rhyme, there is a reason.

What is the orbit of my soul? What is the shape of its cloud where the electrons bloom, circle and cycle out of the centre and back? *Que sais-je?* In Montaigne's work, the orbital is strong. His I moves from the literal bolting horse, the threat of melancholy lunacy, the rushing images outside of the self, to the interior — the place of contemplation and writing. A crypt, a temporary internal burial ground, where there is still melancholy and madness, but where, by writing through it — producing something, evidence of toil and turmoil — he may return to the world. Where the cycle begins once again, surely, but with the knowledge that its highs and lows, its obliques and angles, all emanate from and return to the same place — tethered to the centre of the self. Perhaps we search, from ourselves and back to ourselves, implicated in every success, every failure. We resist degeneration into madness by ennobling it into writing. And thereby, we grow; we return to ourselves and to the world alike, each time fuller and more evolved than the last. If we can bear it. We consume ourselves, and we are consumed. As Barthes' quotes St. John of the Cross in *A Lover's Discourse*, 'and the night was dark and it illuminated the night'.[313] Inversions, conversions, consumptions. The writer, writing, as both Body and Host. The text is no ordinary food or nourishment; it is something else entirely.

Lead us to temptation, and deliver us not from evil.

313 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2002), p.172.

Sometimes I resent the glossary, the concordance of truth, many have about my real life, have like an extra pair of spectacles. I mean that such fact is to me a hindrance to memory.

Otherwise I love to be known by those I care for. *Public assistance,* beautiful phrase. Thus, I am always on the phone, always writing letters, always waking up to address myself to B. and D. and C. — those whom I dare not ring up until morning and yet must talk to throughout the night.

Elizabeth Hardwick, *Sleepless Nights*

Leaving (lessons in composition).

31 March.

Dear X.,

And so it ends. My time here, and with it, our correspondence. Both could continue beyond these walls, though I suspect they will not. To be honest, I feel relieved, as both have been somewhat tortuous — torturous — for better or for worse. I'm sure you will agree.

It's funny, isn't it, Karamazov, all this grief and pancakes afterwards...[314]

Yesterday, I spent some time in the church – both during and after the Sunday Mass. I looked at the altar, of which Xenakis wrote, *I designed a high altar that was judged by the monks to be too abrupt, too high, too separative. In fact I had conceived it a little like a place for terrible sacrifices. It was too dramatic, too Aztec. Christ had sacrificed himself, as did Dionysos, but here, for the friars, the drama had to remain internal and luminous.*[315] Wise words that reminded me a little of my project here, *the drama had to remain internal and luminous.*

I wondered about all of the locked rooms — the places I couldn't get to: no matter how many times I tried the doors, they remained shut. The library, I am most curious about. But, as a hallowed place of scholarship — central to the Dominican ethos — absolutely no access is permitted. And so I have constructed my own library — a series of images that have occurred to me, some with stories attached, others with only feelings; references to books, in between these lines; catalogues of detail, carefully noted and preserved. A commonplace, a compendium.

At the beginning, I thought many thoughts, had many ideas. Believed — in the way we so often do — that because I had an idea, the execution of it was an inevitable attendant.

As I am sure you have noticed, rather than answers — executions, completions — I am full of only questions. For instance — Or — Is it — How — Perhaps —

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314 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, as cited in Hass, *Praise*, p. 47,

315 Iannis Xenakis, in *La Tourette and Other Buildings and Projects: 1955-1957*, p.xii,

I want, I need to explain that the posing of them is a proposal rather than a query: for some things do not possess answers, only possibilities.

For instance, what does a place do to you? Why and how? Physically, intellectually, emotionally, ideologically? What happens when we submit ourselves to its rules and wishes, allowing it to both shelter and shape our needs?

Or, can I address ideas about Architecture, Music, Writing, the Essay, and the Self the (slippery) soul, all in one place, and at the same time?

Is it possible to combine a narrative approach with a non-narrative approach? The singular and linked, alongside the fractured, collaged, and disparate?

How useful is a blueprint, a plan, if you don't know the ultimate form for which you are searching? Is it possible to see the whole from inside one of its tiny units? Or do you have to wait until the melody develops and unravels?

In music, pupils are generally taught that they should start from a cell (a theme or a basic row) and create out of it the 'building' of the composition. However, the form is missing. Form has to be considered unto itself – not only the form that comes about as a result of development, but also the one that affects the details of the work – its cells. And, of course, we also have to be aware of the fact that the cells can affect form. We work with such synthetic methods in architecture and the same approach ought to be used in music.[316]

Perhaps in writing, too. Rules of composition.

All the questions ask, small request, is to be posed again and again and again.

The essay suggests that a question can never be answered, only reconfigured. It is a form of restlessness that cannot be reconciled. A structure of exploration that — constitutionally — will tell you, will do everything but answer for itself.

This place, La Tourette, is so solid — rigid and firm — it feels like my mind has been zooming around, bouncing off the walls, increasing in heat and pressure like an unstoppable thermodynamic reaction. And inside my mind, a different kind of enclosure,

316 Iannis Xenakis, in Balint Andras Varga, *Conversations with Xenakis* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p.27.

the voices echo as in a cave — a tomb — a crypt. A container inside a container, containing — god knows what. A mise-en-abyme of questions, *engeschachelt*, like Chinese boxes. As it turns out, being in a place that quite obviously exists doesn't feel so different from looking for a place, a thing, that doesn't exist at all. You can never rid yourself of the context and content, the labyrinth of your own mind.

Can I tell you a dirty secret? Sometimes, in my secular, objectless prayers, I think that what I'm asking for is an answer. Sometimes I want to know: WHY? But the only thing I ever know is that — I don't know. *I don't know.*

That's how the essay hooks you, keeps you coming back. The essay is a straining of the senses to move, to see, to hear — to try to undersand what transpires in the madness around you. Even when it feels like your hands are tied. Even whey you're lying on the floor, blindfolded. The essay is a practice. It takes practise. Without ever promising to make perfect.

It is possible that these letters to you, all together, might be taken as a representation. It is possible that they compose something inhabitable, at least partially, though I suspect that none of the angles really match up — door unhinged, door jambs uneven, entrances and exits mostly unclear. Windows muddied with finger and handprints, for as most transparent seeming things, purported purviews on the world, portals from interior to exterior, they have been pressed against heavily.

The building metaphors are so easy, so readily available. And yet the obvious metaphor is a failure. For what metaphor seeks is abstraction, not representation. They continue, however, and heedless, down a long hallway, the end of which recedes and recedes.

Moving through rooms is always an excavation of sorts.

We let people enter our houses, the spaces we inhabit. But we all keep some rooms locked. I can only tell you what I keep in mine, offerings that — though paltry and often unfurnished, incomplete even to me — may open doors in my words by which you can enter and wander around for a time, sit for a spell, quietly, and think. Until I ask you to

leave, that is. Politely, of course, but firmly. And while you will have been my guest, it's true that this conversation is not entirely selfless — a Host can be many different things.

So I am asking you to leave now. Please, if you wouldn't mind. I could use some time alone.

No — no — I didn't mean it — stay — please — actually —

Please could you just stay here with me for a few moments. There is so little company, there has been so little company all of this time. I forget myself, I forget my manners — I apologise. I know, yes, it is I who asked you, who invited you here in the first place.

Criticism is thus the medium in which the limitedness of the individual work relates itself methodically to the endlessness of art and into which it is ultimately transposed, for art - as itself understands itself - is a medium of endless reflection.[317]

It's funny, the idea of submitting yourself to a place: allowing it to dictate time, movement, thought. Some moments I feel buoyant, others, the darkness sinks in. Sometimes it doesn't seem like long enough at all, my thoughts are cut off abruptly by the imposed parameters, when they could go on for much longer. But I guess that's the point: you're supposed to come back and do it again, and again, and again. You must provide space, you must make an effort in order for thought to evolve — to progress. One of the reasons ritual prayer is codified is so that you know you are not alone in your devotion — the struggles, the sacrifices. Writing is a ritual too, and reading. When you tire of one, when the solitude sinks in, turn to the other — *coeur sacré* — and wait for its embrace. Words rush in to fill the void, and we know that we are not and never have been truly alone.

This is what I tell myself, at least. This is why I write essays. As though each practice, each repetition lightens my load — strips another piece of flesh off my body, peels it from the bone — gets closer to the whiteness at the centre — makes the poverty of corporeality more bearable. Each word, each essay is an incantation that arrows into the centre of the orbital — the orbit of my soul! It drives like an arrow, bores a hole, secures

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317 Walter Benjamin, 'The Place of the Art Critic in German Romanticism', as cited in Stuart Barnett, 'A Critical Introduction', in Friedrich von Schlegel, *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, ed. and trans. by Stuart Barnett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p.14.

a trajectory. The puncture aches, sweetly, but it does not tear or rend. It is a hole that generates space, a useful emptiness with the possibility of being *filled*, if only for a moment. A caesura, a blush at the centre, the trembling identity. An anatomy lesson, a phantom limb, a beautiful prosthesis.

At the end of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden advises, 'don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody'.[318] But you could easily reverse the quote — tell everybody everything. If you do, you stop missing anybody. Or, do whatever you want! Do whatever *you* need to do to, as James Baldwin writes, 'confront with passion the conundrum of life. One is responsible for life: It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return'.[319]

Writing an essay — writing anything at all — is an elaborate process of choosing what to give and what to hide. Give, hide, show, tell: a deposition rite, a trial. With my endless stream of questions, have I been deposing myself? And what am I on trial for? *Give, hide, show, tell.* These letters to you reveal, they are a reveleation — *the me that is seen*[320] — and in between them, I am hiding. Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors —

In blank spaces it is our duty to dream up coincidences, to cram emptiness with pivotal, star-crossed dovetailings.[321]

La Tourette, like Mendieta's *Labyrinth of Venus*, has been for me a sort of love affair with the essay, with its hard-won moments of victory and its heart-rending failures alike. Wrapped up inside the essay, inside an art work, a building, language, writing — the mind disperses, becomes porous and infinitely permeable. It all but dissolves as the sinuous inflection of the question mark continues to rise and rise, higher and high — please — please — please —

So many times in these days, in my life, I have thought the essay to be a punished and punishing thing. I have mistaken it for love, faith, form, structure, believing that it might lead me to a kind of transcendence. That the discomfort, the awkward wranglings, the

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318 J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (London: Penguin, 1994), p.214.

319 Baldwin, 'The Fire Next Time', in *Collected Essays,* p.339.

320 D.H. Lawrence, 'Art and Morality', in *Study of Thomas Hardy and other essays*, ed. by Bruce Steele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.165.

321 Wayne Koestenbaum, *Hotel Theory* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2007), p.25.

pitfalls, pratfalls, creaky wheels of the mind, dark nights of the soul meant I was evolving — I was *becoming* — finally — I was rising above all the filth and the endless shit of the world. I realise now that I have simply been *making* something. I have been essaying. And that it is possible to extend this feeling — this act — to other things in life, too. Or at least to try: to see everything, every last glittering thing, as a moment of making, a work in progress. If you can bear its precariousness, the reason is dazzling.

Ecce nunct benedicte. It is for you to continue to bless.

As for your beginning and exordium, I no longer remember it; nor consqeuently, the middle; as for the conclusion, I do not desire to do anything about it.[322]

Please accept this crooked coathanger as a small gesture, a token, a sign of how much I *want* to believe. In what, you ask? Squint hard enough, and you could almost mistake the thin wire circle for a halo.

Yours, in caesura,
Emily

322 Montaigne, 'On education', *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, p.126

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