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LYDIA'S URN: EXPLORING TRAUMA, NON-BINARY IDENTITY, AND PLURAL  
SUBJECTIVITY VIA METAMODERN GAMING, A CREATIVE DISSERTATION

ERIC J. PITMAN

248 Pages

Not all non-binary folks, commonly called “enbies,” but also considered trans, often experience gender dysphoria in a manner like the descriptions provided in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). For example, the manual tends towards definitions that include primarily, trans folk who specifically desire the opposite gender they were labeled at birth. However, this does not describe nonbinary/genderqueer folk, and those enbies who *do* report gender dysphoria cover some diagnostic criteria, primarily that associated with a feeling of frustration with gender signifiers and an overall sense of discord between one’s assigned gender identity and lived gender identity. Although Richards, Bouman, and Barker position their work in *Genderqueer and Non-binary Genders* as formative, they acknowledge “...the authors in this volume are the giants upon whose shoulders other may stand” (2), and while there exists other texts describing and compiling the experiences of individuals who fall into these categories, a dearth of literature describing the experiences of non-binary/genderqueer folk remains. This project seeks to expand upon those works.

KEYWORDS: Queer, Trauma, Non-Binary, Poetry, Fiction, Theory

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SUBJECTIVITY VIA METAMODERN GAMING, A CREATIVE DISSERTATION

ERIC J. PITMAN

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2022

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I would like to thank all those who have supported me in this endeavor, namely those members of my committee, but my close friends, too, who have been with me on this journey. Lastly, I want to thank all those queers who came before me, lighting the way. It is your shoulders upon which I stand.

E. J. P.

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## CHAPTER I: TRAUMA & PLURAL SUBJECTIVITY IN ENBIES

*“Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.”*

*-Philip K. Dick*

I wanted to heal, but I felt trapped and suffocated by the encroaching mass of everything around, inside, and emerging out me. I didn’t know how to escape in the manner that others had done before. I didn’t know *if* they had escaped, or how to do any of this because I didn’t know who I was. I felt wrong, and it took me a while to realize that nothing was wrong.

<sup>1</sup>Not all non-binary folks, commonly called “enbies,” but also considered trans, often experience gender dysphoria in a manner like the descriptions provided in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). For example, the manual tends towards definitions that include primarily, trans folk who specifically desire the opposite gender they were labeled at birth. <sup>2</sup>However, this does not describe nonbinary/genderqueer folk, and those enbies who *do* report gender dysphoria cover some diagnostic criteria, primarily that associated with a feeling of frustration with gender signifiers and an overall sense of discord between one’s assigned gender identity and lived gender identity. Although Richards, Bouman, and Barker position their work in *Genderqueer and Non-binary Genders* as formative, they

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<sup>1</sup> I prefer to use the term “enby” and its plural (enbies) in place of “NB,” a common abbreviation for both “non-binary” and “non-black.” The latter category I do not belong to, so I wish to avoid contextual confusion and/or colonizing that lexical space and the persons/contexts it describes.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/can-nonbinary-people-experience-gender-dysphoria-022620197>.



acknowledge “...the authors in this volume are the giants upon whose shoulders other may stand” (2), and while there exists other texts describing and compiling the experiences of individuals who fall into these categories, a dearth of literature describing the experiences of non-binary/genderqueer folk remains.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, a 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey revealed a third of transgender individuals consider themselves identifying as such, and a more recent study conducted by the Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law in a press release dated June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2021, claims that 11% of all LGBTQ+ community members consider themselves nonbinary. That study further notes, “...many cisgender LGBTQ adults also identify as nonbinary—approximately 58% of all nonbinary LGBTQ adults are cisgender and 42% are transgender,” grossly mistaking nonbinary gender as a categorical distinction apart from the trans umbrella, but perhaps also failing to specify whether, in their methods, that *some* nonbinary individuals may also consider themselves cisgender. As Richards, et al note, “Whatever their birth physicality, there are non-binary people who identify as a single fixed gender position other than male or female . . . those who have a fluid gender . . . those who have no gender. And there are those who disagree with the very idea of gender” (5). Another critical distinction to make here is that while not all may *identify* as non-binary, enby, genderqueer to the point of adopting the label, many folks do, in fact, feel themselves as *experiencing* in non-binary ways.

Us nonbinary folk, being trans, do experience a variety of dysphoria(s), ranging from dislike concerning one’s physical attributes, e.g., chest hair, genitals, and/or breasts, the pressure to conform to a single or multiple genders, or feelings of invalidation directed towards an

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<sup>3</sup> Using data gathered from two nationally represented surveys, “Generations,” and “TransPop” (williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu).

inauthentic presentation and lifestyle—an inability to adhere to common non-binary trends, with respect to one’s appearance, though like the occularcentric falsehood that one must *appear* non-binary, dysphoria is not a criteria. However, I as a male-bodied nonbinary person certainly experience a dysphoria that brings, at times, tremendous anxiety, dislike, and discomfort over my appearance or how I think I *should* look—these feelings range from a total “wrongness” about myself that stirs guilt for continuing to appear too male, choosing not to present as feminine in body and clothing, choosing not to style or color my hair in a way that performs queerness, choosing not to pursue any sort of hormone or surgical *fixes*. Furthermore, I perceive these therapies as too permanent, invasive, and laden with risk, given what is still unknown about their use in the bodies of nonbinary folk. For instance, Richards, et al reveal that “When treating patients with non-binary gender identity, it is often the case that the individual desires the minimal amount of hormone possible to maintain health and not unduly impact on the development of unwanted secondary sexual characteristics” (203). I’ve admittedly wanted to express my gender in different ways, same as I’ve wanted to get tattoos, but there is a feeling of anxiety I experience attached to the permanence of decisions involving medical procedures. And I also desire to abstain from what I perceive as common trends that I don’t fall into. Having purple hair is something I want to try, but maybe for only a day. Wearing a dress and make-up is an idea that I find attractive, and I have dressed femininely in the past, but it isn’t fully *me*.

I don’t feel like I understand *me* very often, in fact, and therefore cannot express a *me*. It doesn’t help that I’ve discovered much of the literature that *does* exist about people like me concerns itself almost exclusively with the material—with matter concerning the body. Whether pertaining to its organs and flesh, corrective hormonal and surgical methods available to employ towards the goal of resolving such dysphoria, very few published nonbinary/genderqueer

narratives concern the kind of embodiment where dysphoria, in its daily incursion, reveals the limits of the human body itself, whether pertaining to its ability to encode, house, express and/or perform those informatics (be they psychic or somatic) that transgress one's autonomy and ontological foothold. This dysphoria has presented to me, in the past, as an experience that resists language, or at least, language as-of-yet undiscovered.

And there exists no technology currently that would allow me to change more dramatically from day to day, but all the same, points to the importance in spreading awareness to the benefits of focusing on pathways, as opposed to categories themselves, as in *Navigating Trans and Complex Gender Identities*, Green, et al write:

...spaces of transitions can help us see how, too, thinking about transitions as a state of gender, rather than a fixed and finished approach to ideas may help alleviate misunderstandings about what coming to gender identity may mean. Thinking temporally about gender and about subjectivity and community interrupts the stalled and solid sense of gender. (2-3)

All the same, there are days when I very much enjoy the way I look, or how I *fit*, particularly after a productive gym session. I work out a lot—my activity there grants me a kind of control over my physical form, helping me as well to keep my anxiety at a manageable baseline. In the past I turned to destructive ways of altering my form, not necessarily having a goal in mind, but exhausted with myself in a way that led to unhealthy complacency. Even now, however, if my dysphoria is particularly strong on any given day, I avoid looking at myself, keeping my head down when in front of a mirror. I do not take psychotropic medications of any kind, having only one therapist in the past who insisted I do so. I feel generally healthy, as of the time of this writing, though no less frustrated about myself and the choices I face on a day-to-day basis—

hoping that when I put on clothing that memory promises I “look good” in, I won’t be confronted with something I don’t recognize, or experience a level of discord with that leads to revulsion.

I’ve been calling this a *psychically integrative* dysphoria—this discord emanating from the impossible resolutions between mind, body, being, and desire, and in speaking plainly with others about it, err towards humor by saying “I don’t always like having a body,” or “flesh vehicle.” But what I feel isn’t *only* located in my body. A great deal of it concerns memory, what I imagine I must consist of, and what I wish to become. And I include too the concatenated effects of trauma upon those facets, having survived a childhood replete with daily physical, verbal, mental, emotional, and spiritual abuse. I am not religious, but I tell my students I was raised in a religious cult—it is faster than explaining Baptist Calvinism, in much the same way that I have not attempted to explain to my parents what “non-binary” means, leaving them to understand that I am gay—my sexual orientation has remained relatively stable. However, I find myself using the term “androsexual” more often now, though I find the term lacking, too, for I am just as easily humored, repulsed, confused, etc., by plenty of what masculinity has to offer. I find myself exhausted with attempting to parse more specifically the “what” in terms of my gender identity, my romantic and emotional attractions present in an even more unstable manner.

I first believed myself *demisexual*, a term used to describe someone who must first establish an emotional bond with another person before sexual attraction can occur. But given the ways in which my desires fluctuate and the degree to which touch-aversion presents, I have more recently found myself appreciative of the terms *ace-flux* and *aro-flux* to describe my attractions, terms used to describe an ebb and flow of both romantic and sexual energies, a coming and going across a spectrum where such energies present, for me, in different concentrations. For an example of one extreme end of this spectrum, I enter long periods of

having no interest in (and sometimes even being disgusted by), acts of physical and sexual intimacy, to the point of desiring no physical contact whatsoever. However, there are variations to periods of lukewarmness and extreme desire for these intimacies, and they sometimes do or don't require pronounced emotional bonds with others to be involved.

Many of my relationships of late fall into a queer-platonic category. These are all matters I have only recently become prepared to deal with, I must admit, and it is only through therapy I have chosen to even approach them after spending enough time to begin unpacking my childhood—it isn't a goal of mine to list each one, because how *could* one, but beyond what I've noted thus far, it's likely important to share that I am a mass-school-shooting survivor as well, and what happened there *does* factor into the reasons why—beyond the hypervigilance I developed in growing up with a bi-polar father with his own litany of untreated traumas—when out in public, I'm observing everything, making sure that if dining in to a restaurant, I can see the entrance. Who's coming, who's going—how that trauma still exists in various schemas deep down in my psyche, thus coding my perceptions in various ways, complicates my processing of trauma in adulthood. I am a multiple sexual assault survivor, the most recent instance having occurred during the second year of my PhD coursework in 2017. Following that assault, I received my HIV diagnosis early the following year. I didn't consider myself an alcoholic at that time—that admission came later, sometime after entering therapy.

Dealing with my gender identity and the ways I experience sexual and romantic attraction hasn't always been a priority, but in beginning that work, I felt and still feeling myself robbed of so much—robbed of childhood, of parents capable of dealing with the kind of child I was, robbed of love and affection, and thus in so many ways, robbed of a future that still feels so very fragile, capable of slipping through my fingers at any moment, given the degree to how I find

myself being pulled backwards by all these events, and I discovered quickly in my therapy sessions how impossible it would be to describe everything that has happened to me. My intake required hours and hours. When it came time to write about my experiences (and I *had* written, using prose, but so heavily coded and metaphorized I consider it avoidant), to pursue an idea of authenticity, I knew I would need to remember a lot of terrible things.

It's at the encouragement of my first therapist that I began working with poetry. I have always thought of myself as a prose writer, despite others telling me otherwise (much to my chagrin at the time for how it wrecked my comfortable little stability in genre), but I admittedly felt I had no idea what I was doing, and to some degree, still don't. But I wanted to build an ark for myself, so that I, in a way, could reclaim the things I'd lost, but also discover in that process who I was. I didn't read the many queer poets before me for this work, feeling myself unready—and in an irrational way, too invalid—to take on that mantle, and I recognized going into this work, that their voices don't describe me. I'm not searching for queerness—I'm searching for answers to myself inside of what I both remember and don't, or remember incorrectly, because it doesn't seem like any of what has happened to me, could have happened to anyone and someone survive.

Such a circumstance *is*, without a doubt, a universalism bound to queerness and queer individuals who exist in a world that seeks to destroy us, one tethered as well to the miraculous surviving of any of us, but I reject only surviving. I want to restore myself and thrive. I want to build new story-worlds with my work that shares what I have learned. To accomplish that, I must return to the past and its wreckage of my own history. I have to sail through grief and unspeakable horrors in the hopes my search grants some kind of healing, because I want that, too. Despite my fears in doing so, having the courage to tell parts of my story as I remember

them, to express artistically while remaining true to an authenticity of memory and being—it seemed complicated, given my struggles with myself, but my therapy and many other things I have given to myself have proceeded in a similar manner, so I am no stranger to notion that many of the horrors and griefs therein my encounters comprise a wealth of unknowns.

To treat the past like a kind of literature one might read through, searching for stories to build my ark, this project carries with it the reliance on removal, on absence and the impossibility, as I have described, to fully account for the past, due to my inability to comprehend. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth describes this “enigmatic testimony not only to the nature of violent events but to what, in trauma, resists simply comprehension” (6) as central to the stories found within the wound, but rather than seeking to pathologize, Caruth searches for greater understanding in that which cannot be understood, and, in her engagement with Freud’s notions of traumatic experience “an experience not fully assimilated as it occurs,” (5) those writings falling under her study are:

...marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it [trauma] simultaneously defies and demands our witness. Such a question . . . whether it occurs within a strictly literary text or in a more deliberately theoretical one, can never be asked in a straightforward way, but must, indeed, also be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary; a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding. (5)

Though Caruth writes to uncover the language hidden within psychoanalytic, literary, and literary theory texts, seeking the ways in which awareness (or its absence) factor into language and narratives of trauma, I feared in my own project that the very obscuration of trauma itself would irrevocably work its way into my own practices. That trauma would write upon my own labors a kind of falseness, even as I sought to expose and delve further into many of those

wounds still trapping me. I wanted, with my literary language emerging from this project, to communicate that *stuckness* without becoming stuck myself, a symptom common to my own practices where plenty of times I have chosen to abandon a project related to my trauma rather than overcome its perceived difficulties and what they are intrinsically related to in terms of said trauma.

While I was, for a time, interested in rooting out *which* trauma, my own creative work taught me that immediately decipherable “discovery” may be scarce (or perhaps that I should not prioritize such discoveries). Discovery is emergent, for engaging memory while attempting to stay present yanks me back in time and often obscures where I am headed with my work. Regardless of whether I, in the moment of writing, wax poetic about my father slaying rabbits, or my mother shouting at my brothers and I on the way to church, etc., I can’t always see the end result of that work. I am just writing, in some sense, in a place and time both inside and outside of myself, a place that forbids fully knowing. Peter A. Levine describes these “crucial implicit memories” (55) as great inhibitors to procedural memory—the knowing how to do things. *Writing*, in this case. Finishing projects, though in a broader context, performing healthy actions towards positive life choices, developing healthy relationships to myself and others, to my work, and therefore avoiding the patterns of behavior I recognized as unhealthy, as imprisoning and emblematic of being *stuck*. Levine also writes, regarding this *stuckness*:

Pendulation . . . refers to the *continuous, primary, organismic rhythm of contraction and expansion*. Traumatized individuals are stuck in chronic contraction; in this state of fixity, it seems to them like nothing will ever change. This no-exit fixation entraps the traumatized individual with feelings of extreme helplessness, hopelessness, and despair. Indeed, the sensations of contraction seem so horrible and so endless, with no apparent



relief in sight, that individuals will do almost anything to avoid feeling their bodies. The body has become the enemy. These sensations are perceived as the feared harbinger of the entire trauma reasserting itself. However, it is just this avoidance that keeps people frozen, “stuck” in their trauma. (55)

My efforts in liberation began with *ARTIFICE X*, a creative writing device formed in the spirit of celebrating a past full of table-top and role-playing games, but its design carries the hopes of carving a way (for queer creatives like myself who also question the category of their own existence) out of myself—out of the grand, elusive definitions that others have for us that we queer folk weren’t consulted for, did not approve of, but inextricably find ourselves interred by. Queer theories to whom I owe a debt of gratitude, yet also feel in some ways abandoned by (and by the LGBTQ+ community in many ways too) because of their preoccupation with finding category, with the perceived, reductive stability a category enjoys, with their supermarket supply via a neoliberal fountain of so-called progress. I feel both lost in an impossible catalogue where labels have lost their meaning yet possess an unbearable weight. And I feel sanitized, too, by another kind of white supremacy. One that calls itself “queer,” but wears it only as a mask.

I tire of the liminal spaces to which enbies such as myself find ourselves consigned to, in that we are always already compelled to situate ourselves—whether by those possessing all the keys to power within academia (white cishefts), or those belonging to the LGBTQ+ community who only reproduce the very oppressive regimes they profess to combat—as pedagogical instruments for the purpose of helping others to understand those identifying under the genderqueer and nonbinary categories as multidimensionally complex persons who are also vastly and distinctly different from other trans persons. And it is dangerous for us enbies, too, given that by majority, trans persons desire categorical stability in their gender expression that

we enbies either do not, or find ourselves adversely position to want or capable of achieving, thus we are perceived as a threat, as frauds, or as incapable of choosing a category, existing as unrecognizable liminal objects and therefore insufficiently trans. Or rather, it is the mass-corporate media's sanctioned images of cherished and well-loved figures like Tilda Swinton, David Bowie, and other genderqueer celebrities' hard, angular resistances to softness that suffice for a "correct" neither/nor inbetween-ness amidst similar arrays of smashed-together two-sided gender pastiche. In *Nonbinary: Memoirs of Gender*, S. E. Smith notes, "The depiction of our bodies in pop culture often falls into that of a femme man crossed with a butch woman—observers do a double take, asking themselves whether that person is a boy or girl." I resist an otherwise simple solution produced from the perpetuated binary thinking that creates, in effect, yet another simple, one-dimensional divide between trans and nonbinary/genderqueer folk alike.

In pursuing my own narrative inclusion, I haven't wished to, like other narratives I have found, foreground a preoccupation with category that creates yet another derivational category. Nonbinary/genderqueer identity takes on distinction via a locus of oppressions effected by the male/female binary across the material plane, or thus as has been internalized on the psychic plane, a category rooted in trauma. And white privilege courts assimilation and/or appropriation of other cultures' or individual person's narrative accounts that have served to establish domains of knowing for those who have been historically oppressed by white supremacy. While I cannot deny having been influenced by the writings of Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands*, Cheri Moraga's notions of "curdling" across territories, and other works belonging to indigenous cultural notions of "two-spirit" identity, my project expressly forbids appropriating those individuals' work for the purpose of creating yet another category of queer identity. I also do not wish to conflate or foreclose on what other trans folk to whom internal and external gender stability is tantamount—

my aim here is to point to something *other* that I myself feel a great deal of alienation from, in terms of its language.

While my goals in building a restorative ark for myself out of my own history and trauma certainly takes inspiration from those others, in seeking new ways to explore non-binary identity beyond the material, my interests lie, primarily, in notions of becoming that deploy metamodern creative writing instruments as artifice of a theorized communal being. This not only resolves the preoccupation with binary patterning, but also points towards a methodology for a way *through* trauma towards notions of nonbinary being and becoming, rather than those predominantly reliant upon trauma. Resisting that relationship moves identity, as comprised by concatenated, imbricating effects produced by the oppressive structures of the societies we enbies inhabit, from a place of reifying binaries to one that foregrounds the liminalities of our experiences. It combats too, the dangerous and continued invisibilization that can't be resolved by the oversimplified, resolute avoidance not-so-discreetly enacted by widespread deploying of *they/them* and other champion pronouns. And for many enbies who experience dysphoria, its resolution may not be possible.

Invisibility in this case contrasts to and produces again a liminality derived from binary convention, a *hypervisibility*. In *Nonbinary: Memoirs of Gender and Identity*, Haven Wilvich describes relationship as alienating:

...in a city like Seattle where we have a large queer and trans community representing a broad range of gender expressions, my brand of androgyny still isn't commonplace . . .

Even if I could scrape together the thousands of dollars for vaginoplasty, facial feminization, hair removal, tracheal shaves, and hormone replacement therapy, I would

still stand out. It would be frustrating to be closer to the expression I want yet be unable to “pass”— unable to choose invisibility when I want it. (58-59)

“Passing” is often a goal of mine when matters of safety are at stake, but not always. And as Wilvich notes, such freedom is not possible for everyone, given the fact that the majority of trans folk are poor and queer of color individuals who lack access to critical resources, or, despite said access, simply do not perceive themselves as capable of passing, or that there exists conditions under which passing is possible, given the nature of their own complex, multidimension experience with transness and enbyness.

In my case, I am also unsure of who or what I would pass *as*—my interests remain limited because what I would wish to do with my physicality, I know is not yet possible in this place in history I inhabit, and therefore cannot be the basis on which I seek out parity with my own dysphoria, leaving myself, and others like me, facing an intractable problem concerning the limits of the human body. And there is another complication here, in redirecting the conversation towards a way out by going inward—it may seem to avoid further confrontation with disharmony between the body and mind, and thus the experiences of those who face the choice each day to attempt to pass and become invisible, or to be subjected to other tortures in the attempt to harmonize the internal and external, the establishing of balance between one’s dysphoria and the many other external pressures to conform, material or otherwise. It does *not*, I argue, and to scheme around this quandary could not be any queerer.

The aim, too, democratizes investigative tools and practices of queer-becoming traditionally sequestered to the academy. Matt Brim, in *Poor Queer Studies*, departing from Kim Emery’s queer critique of Gerald Graff’s “conflation of democratic curriculum with academic ‘transparency’” (155), a rhetorical standardizing for the sake of assessment protocols that

exclude public access and/or serviceability, characterizes the insider/outsider binary as not *only* that: queer academic labors reach out to the world just as the world makes its way in. Thus, queer pedagogy becomes translated in many ways, however these practices aren't only *not hidden*, they are:

...always being translated into other academic contexts (partially but not wholly via rhetorical protocols) and, crucially, into nonacademic contexts where there is no shared language of argument and intellectual engagement. This quality . . . therefore doesn't stake its claim on the entry of its interlocutors into a standardized and shared academic system of meaning making but, rather, precisely on the ability to translate queer ideas into other languages for other audiences. (157)

Arguably, such practices impose debilitating limits predicated by material data upon the translated experiences of all queer-identifying persons. Gayle Salamon examines those feminist provocations to materiality built on the idea of a "...sexuate limit which is both implicit and explicit" (7). Drawing from theorists Elizabeth Grosz and others "who question traditional philosophical notions of the body's corporeal limits, and expand the horizons of what "counts" as a body" (7), the limit itself is challenged, and transferred. She explodes those ideas concerned with consigning the body to a given limit or set of them, arguing the same is true of gender. Salamon writes, "questions about the limits of bodily plasticity become displaced into questions about the limits of gender plasticity, where the foreclosure of gender plasticity in the form of transsexuality is intended to secure the body as a site capable of almost limitless physical reconfiguration" (7). And yes, the queer community writ large has taken these ideas, in writing, towards the extremes of the imagination, making use of social media's vastly interconnected and

immediate platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr’s capacities to connect and allow creators to collaborate in the theorization of *xenogenders*, *neogenders*, and *neopronouns*.

For example, the Tumblr user-page *@Xeno-aligned* serves as an archive/help blog for *neolabels*—a repository of information and collaborative sharing for those seeking alternative language to describe their orientation, gender, and pronouns. These categories have been established for the purpose of overcoming the lexical gap for nonbinary folks and others who struggle with finding a home in any of the broadly known/established gender categories. Sharing between one another, newly designed pride flags for these MOGAI categories, defined by Rachel Sharp of *wrrrdnrrrdgrrrl.com* as “Marginalized Orientations, Gender identities, and Intersex. An all-inclusive umbrella term for asexuals, homosexuals, multisexuals, trans people, and intersex people. Alternative to LGBTQIAP+.” Within these niche Tumblr communities exists the development of pride flags for these new categories as well. For instance, Tumblr user *@Beyond-mogai-pride-flags* describes their page as “Pride flags for marginalized orientations, gender alignments, intersex, and beyond!” while the user “Lunarian Transmasc,” describes their own page as “a fem-aligned transmasculinity . . . aligned with womanhood.” These uses of social media bypass the institutional problems outlined by Brim, yet they illustrate the ways in which queer folks find ourselves by the nature of our very experiences in liminality, oscillating between various boundaries, seeking spaces to express ourselves beyond the body through language and image.

But these productions inhabit the very categorical terrains I have expressed frustration with, including my *own* work. My writing had already served throughout most of my life, first beginning in late adolescence, as a site for expressing various grievances with my own existence (not limited of course to my own body)—and a natural one, to use yet another dangerous word

indicative of certain liminalities betwixt itself and the implied other, even as I am *other* to myself, more often than not, and in ways that exceeds the language I might employ to describe it. Though, I mean here a deliberate “othering” with regard to language. In the spirit of Caruth’s persistence towards a language of stories buried in the text of my own memories and experiences—that which cannot be spoken—I wish to speak what I may in a way that turns back the *othering* that occurs by those who write about us nonbinary and genderqueer folk, those predominantly white, cishet folk within the academy.

But I have found the MOGAI community and what is happening on social media expressly *not for me*, and there exists, under these circumstances, a need to embrace the inescapable dialectic futilities attached to interrogating a *something* in pursuance of another *something*, be it another *other*, nebulous or otherwise. For example, *Xenogender* (from *xeno* alien + “gender”), coined in 2014 by Tumblr user *@Baaphomett* in a submission to the *MOGAI-Archive* blog, is a nonbinary gender identity “that cannot be contained by human understandings of gender; more concerned with crafting other methods of gender categorization and hierarchy such as those relating to animals, plants, or other creatures/things.” *Xenogender* resists definition in relation to the binary. It preoccupies itself instead with ideas that most individuals would not conceive of having anything to do with gender, in fact ([nonbinary.wiki/wiki/xenogender](http://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/xenogender)). For example, the Twitter handle *@genderoftheday* embodies such notions with their tweets, e.g., “The gender of the day is an amiable manticore in a park” (7:51 AM, April 19, 2022), providing each day a variety of tweets that evoke many emotional and contemplative responses from its gender-explosive provocations.

Therein lies the spirit of metamodernity—a demonstrated, acute awareness to one’s own contemporary moment such that, through oscillation a reorientation occurs—mercurial

adaptation, productive assimilation, and redeployment of oneself, of one's own matter (be it language or otherwise), in such a manner to suggest a certain (and paradoxical) obsolescence resides at the center of being—the plethora of potential routes one might pursue, the circumstance of one's plurality and excesses, and the continuous removal of oneself from their own language by that of others locked between irony and the fantastic, the fanatic. Turner writes:

All things are caught within the irrevocable slide towards a state of maximum entropic dissemblance. Artistic creation is contingent upon the origination or revelation of difference therein. Affect at its zenith is the unmediated experience of difference *in itself*. It must be art's role to explore the promise of its own paradoxical ambition by coaxing excess towards presence . . . Just as science strives for poetic elegance, artists might assume a quest for truth. All information is grounds for knowledge, whether empirical or aphoristic, no matter its truth-value. (2011)

<sup>4</sup>To embrace one's own oscillating, what Sarah Helen Binney calls “an oscillation from the self to something greater and back to a renewed understanding of the self” (metamodernism.com), there arrives within the given pause of the pendulum swing, recognition of something vast and infinite. Oscillation describes one's surrendering apathy to movement between two mutually exclusive ideas that the turn back (though not necessarily equal) grants inside the brief pause the generating of an excitement—the creation of the sublime in plurality. For example, Binney examines Patrick Ness' *The Crane Wife*, noting, “. . .all three concepts are combined. The movement of the fantastic, between the real world of the text and a folkloric supernatural,

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<sup>4</sup> Binney also notes: “The sublime was defined by Kant in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a short-lived feeling of terror and delight, of pleasurable pain . . . He described it as a “momentary checking of the vital powers”, a temporary pause which gives way to a revelation of the power of reason. Neil Hertz later emphasizes the stoppage inherent in Kant's ‘checking’ and describes it as a ‘blockage’, which is again followed by a turning back into the self” (metamodernism.com). See also: Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects*.



functions in the same way as the metamodern movement between irony and enthusiasm. This metamodern balancing act allows for the creation of a sublime which is kept in check by the constant motion between its two extremes, unbelievably Romantic and utterly empty” (metamodernism.com). While textual readings in metamodernism foreground binary movements between irony and enthusiasm, this dissertation’s queer enterprise explodes the concept towards more sacrilege than what other scholars would risk, conceiving of a vast array where oscillation, in speaking to the kinds of pluralities that nebulous, liminal identities like enbies and other gender non-conforming or genderqueer persons conceptually occupy, does not observe strict linearity, nor does it occur in exclusivity to others. Though, Binny admits that while an apt term, the religious connotation conceals what she finds, definitionally, more accurate—something *sacred* as in what Ness described as “special corner of what’s real, a sacred moment set apart from, but anchored in, the ordinary world” (metamodernism.com). Metamodernism’s oscillations rather, have become enmeshed in others, their effects rippling outward from a perceived, obsolescent center: a history that while shaped by trauma and memory, does not only consist of such. But as I consider oscillation fundamental to not only my own enbyness, but to all folks identifying as queer and impossible in full knowing, the murky tapestry whose layered gravities overpower the nonbinary subject’s waking mind constitutes as well, a presence or presences so vast as to necessitate, in the quest for restorative language, a collaborative poesis.

For my own processes, I envisioned what I began doing as chimeric—a thing that is hoped for but remains elusive and imaginary, though I do not discount too those other meanings wherein the connective tissues of various other organisms are included. Specifically, that I was relying on an artifice comprised of many table-top, role-playing game conventions, making use of my imagination, my history, along with dice play, chance, and a combination of

predetermined thematic structures that represented areas of interest seemed chimeric, and to some degree, calculated and embracing of one's journey into the realm of traumatic memory. The fundamental creative practices of *chimeric permutation* become realized in *ARTIFICE X*. Truly, the game enjoys a complement of iterative processes that inhere Caruth's futility in full knowing and understanding, even as such is promised, which may remain detectable only through this concealment. The game provides a set of tools to create the most outlandish of circumstances, and my own traumatic memories serve as the substrate for this fanciful playpen, an engagement with the device far different from my students' interpretation of its mechanisms in the introductory creative writing classroom. How I understand my lived experiences in conversation with others (the personal), informed by the brave theoretical work of others (the mechanical) machines a synthesis of innovation. Quite plainly, I think of the game as a virtual-reality-like-simulator that through the compiling of one's own narrative, is capable of producing a catharsis (whether by purging, or (re)writing/righting trauma) through various, metacognitive engagements via the textual production of its artifice.

I abandoned the dice and card decks my students used, drawing additional inspiration for my interpretation of the game in parallels between my subject matter and Anne Boyer's *Garments Against Women*, a project I find undertakes an oscillatory metamodern vacillation between antipodal concepts (much in the same manner described in Binney's analysis). Specifically, I found Boyer's work speaking to the grand powers governing my existence, yet in her work there remained that key removal of full understanding the project would seem to promise, leaving one ultimately trapped, or *stuck*. Poignantly, in "The Animal Model of Inescapable Shock," Boyer writes, "Monuments are interesting mostly in how they diminish all other aspects / of the landscape. Each highly perceptible thing makes something else al- / most

imperceptible. This is so matter of fact, but I've been told I'm incom- / prehensible:" (4). Such invisibility may at first suggest a failure in the project, though counterintuitively, my invisibility remains integral to my nonbinary experience and therefore, this project.

In perceiving myself under the constraints of a "game," one in which specific strictures often (but not always) denoted my subject matter, I embrace the failures of any given permutation, for as being imaginative in their play, they must access the vast temporal span my memory is capable of mustering, from child to adult, assuming therein that porous and volatile nature as described by Halberstam and Edelman. While Halberstam speaks to the embracing of the inevitability of failure in the pursuit of new possibilities that overturn norms, be they Utopian or not, Edelman rejects the heterosexist notion of a Utopia secured through the category of the "child." Inertias integral to my play in various chimeric permutations exploring my enbyness, then—the presupposed power and authority of category—do not always rely on nor adhere to structural strictures or rules, however, as would be suggested by a defined game mechanic.

Likewise, I have not always articulated my own history as I remember it to have occurred, and with an awareness to the experience of necessary, continual strategic adaptation and re-imagining, have disrupted my own comfortable practices and the concrete genres of prose and poetry through which they take shape. As iterative processes, identity experiments and hypothesized challenges to power and authority in the creative writing workspace of collaborative world-building situate queer and minority participants as components.

My experimental work too attempts to express, in the context of a contemporary moment defined by various ongoing calamities (e.g. annihilation via illness, via rampant, runaway climate feedback loops, via resource scarcity and supply-chain overshoot, via the persistent threat of nuclear war) efforts meant to cope with a conundrum of personal history distorted by oppressive

regimes, experienced traumas, shifting identities, and the possibilities and anxieties associated therewith.

Sometimes, when employing the game mechanics of chimeric permutation, I make use of its most structured form—to evoke powers and authorities for their interrogation. And as I am both affected by and inhabit some of these positions (particularly those of whiteness and being a part of the academy). I seek to challenge and overthrow those structures, but not absent from this dialogue is the *privilege* to do so, as Andrea Smith notes, “the undoing of privilege occurs not by individuals confessing their privileges or trying to think themselves into a new subject position, but through the creation of collective structures that dismantle the systems that enable these privileges” (264). Even so, my practices require an engagement with specific tools for responsibly and ethically doing so, drawing from Ibrahim Xendi, Ijeoma Oluo, and many others in efforts to decolonize and make accessible this project as much as possible. The other parts, where play and performance with permutation (or its abandoning) result in exceeding variation and possibility, remain necessarily fraught and imperiled by risk. In *Literature in the Ashes of History*, Caruth echoes the existential anxieties intimated by the re-writing and thus disappearing of history, but so too do the futilities interred by my project, as whatever product(s) result from chimeric permutation might be mere dilution of an evident, untenable object of consciousness traversing time and space, yet this work is performed *in spite of* such precarity.

Shame, suspicion, and melancholy haunt the absence of my own enbyness, a perception the writing of this dissertation hopes to reconcile in some capacity, though not without its subsumed paranoias, but I resist the notion of critical inquiry’s stultifying effects that Sedgwick redefines in her own employ of paranoia. I find its *anticipatory* quality, “...unidirectionally future-oriented vigilance” (130), and characterization as *faith in exposure*, “...in practice, an

extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge per se—knowledge in the form of exposure” (138) as indicative of a specific history from which the elusive language I seek emerges. Though, I depart from Sedgwick’s assertion that a hermeneutics of suspicion invites *only* visibility, therefore violence, or that visibility should suggest *only* evidence of violence, or that witnessing of violence (especially those violences experienced) should in any way foreclose on a productive capacity. As Sedgwick claims, in reading Klein, “to read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader *as new*” (146), my emphasis in using the reparative stance finds the discovery and surprise of knowledge embedded within horrors crucial, even if they are not new. I recognize this trait of revisitation and repeated, paradoxical novelty perhaps unique to my own artistic endeavors in that the conditioning to my own embodied violence, routine or otherwise, emerges as specters that haunt others. To be clear, the “triumphalism of paranoid hermeneutics” Sedgwick speaks to in *Touching, Feeling* isn’t my goal, nor an endeavor crossed between the dipoles of positive and negative affect theory, but rather, *distinction* among the effects and labors produced by its hopeful engagement with the many invisibilized others inside of me. Sedgwick writes:

Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects [they] encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for [them] to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn could have happened differently from the way it actually did. (146)

Sedgwick proceeds to note that “A more ecological view of paranoia wouldn’t offer the same transhistorical, almost automatic conceptual privileging of gay/lesbian issues that is offered by a Freudian view” (146-47), departing from the Freudian, Oedipal, mechanical routine of genealogical trauma, a contingency that only strengthens itself via invocation and thus forecloses on queer possibilities. Doing so leaves one better suited to enact the reparative processes—those largely free of the kinds of paranoid attention that foreclose on the possibilities for potential justice I believe inherent to any language which may emerge from my practices.

In its most ideal form of seeking re/righting of self and liberation from a house of stuckness, the chimeric permutation invoked by the gaming mechanisms of *ARTIFICE X* reveal, interrogate, and cannibalize from relational histories the perceived, unresolved traumatic potentiates towards the development of new relations. Thus, reparative meaning. Sedgwick’s articulation of such additive, reparative readings call for taking “a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks . . . [that] what we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them,” (151). I do not employ meaning-making devices as a paranoid scouring and breaking down of myself into its dangerous part-objects only as an endeavor focused on the reparative, on the demystifying, but also the visionary—the fortuitous rewarding in one’s enacted performative practices (of writing and being) as is permitted by the circumstance of the moment of play (under whatever governance is present in the machine), a response from the abyss to those beyond its waters.

This motive belies dangerous work. With the limits of defining against the binary producing another binary, the project’s rejection of gender as a spectrum (I align myself with the many individuals now speaking of gender as a more nebulous construct) too crafts opposites and

presupposes a given occularcentricity. Again emerges a binaristic rejection of visibility altogether, and therefore its surmisability. I do not think of gender as imperceptible in total, but I do find many genders somehow derivative of the binary, and additionally complicated by the competing narratives established by gender theorists and their scholarship, the performed in public by celebrities, influencers, and other individuals of note. And, to be frank, these designations and the power and authority they imply have always confounded me, for isn't *everyone* a gender theorist?

I do not wish to reject gender altogether, or to cavort along in perpetual ridicule of those visions received, even as that may be possible, and necessary, at times. Though by some measure, I *do* wish to reject the singular body and mind in which I perceive all this activity occurring—a playground of sorts that offers the satisfaction of its ridicule. This endeavor often leads to disaster, and though I do not mean to employ a kind of relativistic thinking here. Each disaster in *ARTIFICE X*'s chimeric permutation has its own value, its own apocalypse that reveals a *something* towards the language I seek. And it is, again, that *missing* of my history that I seek to mend within this restorative ark, and though fictional, this effort takes on, with its proximity to overlapping cognitive processes, meta-productive attributes which therefore become, in the case of my own aims of healing, meta-affective. This awareness necessitates a *name* (and *naming* exists as integral to this project's larger aims), which I have coined a *metalogue*—the artifact recovered through meta, poly-diagetic metamodern machining of (sub)consciousness and reality—a genesis only sometimes governed by rules, wherein rules are subject to the game of the machine itself.

The five-year interdisciplinary project in *collaborative world building* known as *Steampunk Rochester*, conducted by Trent Hergendrader, emphasized student interactions with

various media in the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction. Students are challenged “to *think critically* about fictional worlds and a given person’s place in it” but also allowed “to *respond creatively* when reflecting on what they had learned” (135). Hergenrader’s approach favors versatility, rather than a meticulous, fixed, and step-by-step, game-mechanic methodology. The version highlighted in his essay incorporates digital tools that expand student interactions beyond what might be conceived through printing on paper. Through interconnected wiki entries, students increase the intricacy of collaboration, but no clear considerations reveal how such narrative takes shape in the dialectic and dialogic processes Hergenrader highlights specifically for an individual, however, and that poses concern regarding the colonial roots of world building, specifically in relation to how narrative and meta-narrative might be construed to essentialize some identities over others.

However, Hergenrader’s brand of world-building disappoints in its hysterically incompleteness. The omission of decolonial tools absolutely necessary to ensure one’s creative approach suggests the reproduction of the very same white, patriarchal heterohegemony of its participants—the mimetic encoding into any given fictional gameworld and its fundamental dialogic practices the very matrices of domination plaguing our own realities. Summarily omitted too, from Hergenrader’s more comprehensive work, *Collaborative Worldbuilding for Writers and Gamers*, is any feminist, queer theories of identity, or discussion of agency to overturn the emergence of essentialist narratives that may impinge on the identities and/or practices of other participants (or how one might recognize and/or interrogate them on their own). On the topic of identity specifically, in discussing the various races found to populate fictional table-top, role-playing gameworlds such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, Hergenrader commits less than two pages to the topic. The resulting, mere anecdotal mentioning sparsely



covers how essentialist ideas infiltrate collaborative projects. Rather, it should assume them to *already* be present in the ideologies of those collaborating writers. While critical to this dissertation, the relatively novel available literature exploring game-theories as creative genesis/praxis (whether individual or collaborative) grossly overlook theories of identity in general, let alone those issues this dissertation concerns itself with. But in the case of how oppressive regimes shape identity (including the categories one *does* inhabit, e.g., race, class, ability *and* those regarding gender and sexual orientation) and how trauma informs a creative process, I foresee a certain bind here that perhaps can't be worked out of. As one interrogates trauma, or perhaps at minimum explores one's own agency to do so, one also invokes it, thus is given the opportunity to *reproduce* it. This may not be only a choice, too, but evidence of privilege—one's inability to perceive the ways in which their work subconsciously impedes their best efforts. The Metalogue presupposes this bind, embracing it despite those conditions—the way out is *in* and *through*.

In machining the world(s) of a given metalogue, I want to foreground some boundaries I've encountered in addition to those already mentioned. I do not consider this an arbitrary hedge—this dissertation's theories and methodologies advances the work of many whose community I consider myself a part of, but others to whom I do not. Namely, Brandon Shimoda's *The Grave on the Wall*, wherein the poet's work spans time and place in the hopes of illustrating the life of his late paternal grandfather, Midori. Shimoda's depiction pursues an absence, same as myself, though I do not mean at all to conflate my experience with the Japanese Americans of the twentieth century, nor Shimoda's creative project that, in its revealing, might be characterized as an elegiac honorarium (though I would admit that there *is* a kind of mourning

sometimes present in my process). But I do scour a history in search for an absence, an absence of myself that such determined history has stolen or foreclosed on as possible.

There *is* an honoring of myself in the building of my ark. “For our writing to be a healing experience,” Louise Desalve writes, “we honor our pain, loss, and grief. We learn what the process of writing will hold for us by learning from good mentors and guides” (52). We immerse, observe, and report back our findings, and keep at the forefront of our attention to the ways in which we do these things. In other words, our processes, strategies, oscillations, futilities, feelings, be they known, or undefined informatics of frustration and perceived failure. DeSalvo says that “Because we understand that doing the work might be painful, we honor our feelings and witness them instead of denying them or ignoring them. In this way, we enable ourselves to tolerate them” (52). She describes, in the witnessing of so many students also engaging with such deep psychic pain so consistently for years, the belief that such pains, their losses, their evictions of the Self from possible futures, even their escape from one’s faculties of perceiving, one’s languages of expression, their griefs unresolved, serve “as the basis for virtually every act of cultural creation . . . writing about these subjects is something we can deliberately choose to do as a “righting” process, engaging in an act of restitution for “righting” what profoundly disturbed us” (52-53). Theoretical underpinnings notwithstanding, I invoke my history and plurality, the foreclosed-upon possible futures towards a similar righting in addition to the discovery of its language and truths therein, intended not only for myself, but for others, too.

But as production via machined experiences creates unpredictable affects, the cognitive engagement with these affects—determining their meaning—creates further affects. Affect via affect. Production via production. Any given metalogue’s terminus exceeds perception, and in

the process of its negotiation via my own imaginarium, leads to the recurring perception of failure, by which I mean, the decision to end a metalogue's sequence and define its result inheres a given, inescapable foreclosure on possibility, to accept its terminus in the ideal sense—one that embodies *healing* (again, an exemplar)—is also absurd, for that is not how trauma is understood to function, and that is not how I wish the Metalogues to appear. They exist as othered bodies, bodies that for me represent an augur turning up the apocalypse of my own plural being-ness towards this “righting” that DeSalvo speaks of. And the journey into and through apocalypse, the great revealing that leads to a series of unavoidable catastrophes, cannot be discounted as being an integral part of that healing, that unearthing and future righting, perhaps every part of it. For we are always failing, always shifting, and always seeking the righting path.

## CHAPTER II: ARTIFICE X: A PEDAGOGY OF TABLE-TOP GAMING

In the fall of 2018, I devised a creative writing workshop course that questioned existing dialogues concerning the history and nature of the writing workshop itself, observing too, greater distance traditionally given to notions of creative “process,” “product,” and “writing.” Departing from those stable categories—which to this day in our post-Covid-lockdown world I still believe are prevalent in traditional Iowa-style workshops featured in MFA and PhD programs—I found myself primarily driven by Katherine Haake writings in Bruce McComiskey’s *English Studies: An Introduction to the Discipline(s)*. Here, Haake draws from many existing traditions of workshop model where the author remains silent during peer-evaluation and is trained not only to publish, but also to teach said practices. Haake foregrounds, in the ongoing dialogue of creative writing as an academic discipline that struggles to find itself, noting how the nature of its practices are inextricably tied to the challenges the field (at the time of her writing, and currently still) faces. However, she notes that the discipline “must also commit itself to the rigorous study of both text and theory,” (167). But as I believe this an incomplete equation, I resolve it with the inclusion of the mind/body-as-text—the primary text from which such theories should emerge for the writer is capaciously productive of theory.

In *What Our Speech Disrupts*, Haake also mentions that she had at one point parroted the very same assumptions of the creative writing community of teachers—she framed writing as naturally-occurring, as symptomatic of sheer talent and thus ultimately unteachable. This prognosis ultimately inheres the heavy reliance of assessment geared towards *publishability* of a work—an idea that requires inadequately defined, yet widespread assumptions (180). Especially so, given the continuous changes in dynamics between how institutions, through powerful influences around market flows of capital, perceive themselves in relation to one another as

productive engines of those terrifying words *literature* and *art*. Forwarding Patrick Bizarro's articulation of the resiliency of the workshop to change, a condition he defines as produced from the century-old practice of the teacher/master's use of "*lore* to determine what they should do in instructing their students" (296), and a resiliency only strengthened *through* the questioning of its underlying assumptions, Haake seeks to move the dialogue beyond Bizarro's foundational efforts of rendering the discipline distinct. Haake senses that the community has "grown more self-aware, more deliberate about this [workshop] model . . . there is something endearing about the way it has endured, and it's certain to continue in ever-evolving forms" (180). The workshop persists as somewhat of a home-like territory that can't be found elsewhere—a private space concerned with producing art that is sequestered away from the demands of the academy.

The problem remains then, that no one is sure what creative writing scholarship looks like when the productive center of gravity in creative writing *is* the workshop, a space *away*, or writings about how to do it differently, or better, and why. I wanted to give students a chance to enter the workshop without those pressures, to find some familiarity, but I also wanted to provide a different kind of "away," a space where they would experience something free of the notions that they would be expected to craft art and literature. It was an impossible task, given our class took place in a university classroom, but I carried with me Haake's notions. The presupposition of one's body-as-text theoretically informing creative practices is where I began—our workshop would be a home-away-from-home where the distinct problematizing of "writing" itself would take place.

As Francesca Coppa has noted, bodies-in-space, particularly those among fandom and gaming communities, assume a communal nature similar to theatrical performance—texts are produced in their respective sets of practices as a type of play/performance. I developed a table-

top gaming engine to serve as the primary tool of making work in this course. The first step of its use would focus on worldbuilding. After all, bodies need not only a home, but a world to inhabit. Called *ARTIFICE X*, my course-long teaching strategy for creative writing uses table-top, role-playing game mechanics to emulate the processes of both a single and multiple-player virtual games. Students and instructor alike use a portion of each class session to “play,” and thus through various gameplay-community processes, they produce creative texts oriented towards individual and/or collective world-building/remaking campaign(s).

The game also necessitates a collaboration between self/selves, others, and spaces not commonly present in the creative writing classroom, thereby granting a production with transformative capacity to the individual. For example, students developed and deployed narrative campaigns (through dialogue, gameplay, re-play, and experiment), a virtual “writer-as-character” who interacted with and evolved within their “virtual” worlds and among their inhabitants. I use the word “virtual” to communicate the direct relationship between the functionality of this workshop’s gameplay and the gameplay of similar, computerized world/character-building mechanisms that also feature avatars. The distinction lies in the unpredictability and fluidity of the virtual-writer and their producing of texts, recovering/(re)discovering of such texts from their worlds, and the subjective “visiting” of other player worlds for the purpose of exploring and contributing to another’s creative space through dialogue, negotiation, and other writing practices. To be specific, in a later iteration of this workshop design, which took place in the Spring of 2022, just before the pandemic struck, a collaborative team of four Media Studies students crafted a world and inhabitants—player-character/avatars—that not only envisioned the conventions of a sitcom comedy show but also incorporated elements of meta-commentary. The team considered our class to be their “writer’s

room,” a space where various productive forces encircled their work. Our class influenced how the narrative advanced with each additional week of play, and it is worth noting that these students chose not to limit their activities to our classroom meetings.

I considered it self-evident that students would grow over time and advance their strategies as they either interacted with myself as instructor or formed various networks of communication between themselves (or with other who were not a part of our classroom space). Various queer-theory approaches grounded my approach, but I drew primarily from Judith Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure*, wherein Halberstam emphasizes that failure, under the appropriate circumstances, may “offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world . . . escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human developments . . . preserve some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturb the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers” (2-3). These thoughts manifest in the game’s employment of dice rolls, card draws, co-authorship, collaboration, communal dialogue, imaginative theory of the self, world-building, and meta-layer writing through the deployment of “virtual” character/avatars (the operative “makers” of work produced). Productivity then, oriented along a thread of opportunistic failure and rewarding replay that permitted students to create their own worlds, their own sanctuaries of productivity, process, and writing within and beyond the classroom space.

I found it necessary to incentivize closer engagement between the game’s mechanics and one’s creative processes. Under the most ideal conditions, gameplay proceeded in a somewhat self-directed, meritocratic productivity, but it remained confined to few students. Competitive collaboration, which, within the game’s mechanics comes with the promise of reward, e.g., the ability for one to reverse some of their previous writing decisions, whether related to story

progression and/or facets of the character/avatar(s), world-formation, etc., often carried with it a perception of risk. However, some students wished to keep their projects and practices private until workshop, thus only reifying the very workshop structures I wished to dismantle. By majority, they did not compete, per se, or necessarily wish to. In later iterations of the game that took place in two sections during the fall 2019 semester, and a single class the following Spring 2020 semester, I made it an integral function of the gaming mechanics that players contribute to the work of another. My motive was to bring awareness to the reward and advantage of engaging the creative capacities of another. Relative to those processes enacted in communication with the game's more democratic functions of dice roll and card draw, collaboration also served as a means to forwarding one's own progress into the development of a game world. Thus, the incentive for the aforementioned team of students who wished to parody a comedy sitcom's writer's room. Even so, like the first iteration of the game, conducted in the fall of 2018, as Instructor I retained special functions of gameplay designed to reassert balance, and if necessary, I reserved powers for the purpose of maintaining an ethics of creative integrity and consent. I maintained oversight of all player actions for the purpose of intervention, as it was discussed that players were barred from performing actions that could be potentially destructive to another's project and/or practices of production/play.

Much of this work came about in my personal experience regarding table-top, role-playing games, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, and I communicated my role to those students familiar with the game as "dungeon master" (DM), although some more recent texts influenced my approach to creating *ARTIFICE X*. These are card-based, community-strategy video games such as *Slay the Spire*, a game in which player choice inherently affects future outcomes and character attributes. I also drew from Sarah Lynne Bowman, who notes in *The Functions of*



*Role-Playing Games* that such games as these which envision world and player development invoke three key functions in their specific practices:

First, role-playing enhances a group's sense of communal cohesiveness by providing narrative enactment within a ritual framework. Second, roleplaying encourages complex problem-solving and provides participants with the opportunity to learn an extensive array of skills through the enactments of scenarios. Third, role-playing offers participants a safe space to enact alternate personas through a process known as identity alteration. (1)

The creative writing workshop, it may be argued, permits these functions in some capacity already, but by its very premise of mechanics and “writer-as-character/avatar” deployment in practice, *ARTIFICE X*, actively pursues Bowman's outlined functions, rather than simply affording participants the opportunity. I also took up questions in my approach that Rhetoric and Composition scholars such as Cathy Caruth in *Literature in the Ashes of History* and Richard Miller in *Writing At the End of the World* have foregrounded. For example, while Caruth insists we ask “What does it mean for history to disappear? What does it mean to speak of a history that disappears?” (x), Miller similarly ponders, in almost a desperate, certain plea derived from the knowledge of the doom ahead, “Why go on . . . when everything seems to be falling apart? Why write when there's no hope of ever gaining an audience?” (x). I proceeded from their questions in both a collective and subjective context with an aesthetic and pedagogical premise situated in Metamodernism, an aesthetic largely contained to various social media platform writing practices, but emergent via unique exigencies to democratize one's own work and subsequent potential capital within the contemporary modern art world.

In referring to the *Metamodernist Manifesto*, eight key precepts that most significantly encapsulate the theoretical parameters of a world-building, generative-focused, collaborative

creative writing workshop such as *ARTIFICE X* begins with the manifesto's acknowledgement to "oscillation" as a natural order of the world through which "Movement shall henceforth be enabled by way of an oscillation between positions, with diametrically opposed ideas operating like the pulsating polarities of a colossal electric machine, propelling the world into action" (Turner). Many of *ARTIFICE X*'s basic game functions prioritize the opportunity and certain inevitability of such fluctuations. Indeed, the game invokes a great deal of chance that can, if participants choose, be augmented by other actions or navigated otherwise entirely, keeping with said experiences certain inevitabilities that playing a game with others invokes. For instance, whether originating from an individual or communal perspective, such repositioning renders possible—at minimum—the opportunity for recruitment, transmutation, or strategic re-positioning of oneself from other members, even if finding oneself in that moment occupying a seemingly paradoxical position, a very fundamentally queer concept. But most preeminently, I creatively and pedagogically align myself with the following presumption as well:

The present is a symptom of the twin birth of immediacy and obsolescence. Today, we are nostalgists as much as we are futurists. The new technology enables the simultaneous experience and enactment of events from a multiplicity of positions. Far from signalling its demise, these emergent networks facilitate the democratization of history, illuminating the forking paths along which its grand narratives may navigate the here and now . . . *metamodernism* shall be defined as the mercurial condition between and beyond irony and sincerity, naivety and knowingness, relativism and truth, optimism and doubt, in pursuit of a plurality of disparate and elusive horizons. (Turner)

Such aesthetic premises made themselves most evident in the experimental creative writing workshops I conducted through mechanics of gameplay that emphasized, through their

repetition, a continual development of personal and collaborative strategy. For instance, my methodology, while recruiting many precepts from those historically-oriented workshops such as the Iowa-style and Liz Lerman's critical response formats, similarly propels itself towards the unknown, the unpredictable, and thus the inevitable, in much the same way that philosopher Alain Baidou proposes of the axioms of dialectical materialism: that "every world is capable of producing, within itself, its own truth."

Fundamentally, the truths my students wished to speak about themselves, their experiences, and their worlds, were, understandably, as vast and diverse as one could imagine. However, they all, in some way, concerned themselves with impending apocalypse. For example, overwhelmingly, students in the fall 2018 section of *ENG 227: Introduction to Creative Writing* concerned themselves with matters of apocalypse, in both the generating of their character/avatar and respective worlds of inhabitation. Whether due to climate change, nuclear exchange, or increasing centralization of totalitarian powers, the worlds that students crafted demonstrated a broad range, from desolate landscapes to fantastical realms. Protagonists sought truths that would resolve their existence, where others addressed matters of body dysmorphia and gender-affirming powers of transformation. Students explored various internal and external struggles, their characters fighting to navigate systems of oppression—cages designed to eliminate historically oppressed, undesired individuals from society, particularly those identifying as LGBTQ+—whether they be off-world encampments, or psychic simulations (prisons) for the mind. I don't have a reasonable answer for this outcome, for this preoccupation with disaster, apocalypse, and other dire realities, as there were no supporting texts in this course that would have inspired these topic areas. Our class sessions did make note of this strangeness,

wherein students displayed an awareness to matters that in retrospect, I find even more poignant now.

At the time of this writing in the late Spring of 2022, we as a species find ourselves confronted with the continued shockwaves of Covid-19, a supply-chain crisis exacerbated by demand overshoot of supply, scarcity driven by port lockdowns and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, crumbling infrastructure, and both our individual and collective consciousness continually under assault by the encroaching inevitability of catastrophic climate change. Strangely were my students not only keen to these threats, but in a way, disconcertedly prophetic, given the oppressive forces their character/avatars also navigated in their own stories.

Students met twice weekly in each of the four sections I led, though fall 2018's course featured an IRB study concerned with student perceptions of their own identities in relation to the terms "gamer," activities of gaming, with a survey being administered that featured pointed questions about table-top gaming (see Appendix A). Targeting the perceived benefits of such a device being incorporated into not only the creative writing classroom, but other university courses writ large, the same survey was administered at the end of this semester as well, to gauge the shift, if any, in student perceptions. Syllabus materials for each section (distributed electronically) included descriptions of gaming materials in the same manner as conventions of most common board games. For instance, an "Opening Prompt" (see Appendix B) situated students in a context where each became familiarized to the conditions under which the character/avatar "awakens" and proceeds to explore their world. This initial step leads directly to a critical decision that assists to organize students in the class. For example, they then chose whether their world would take the shape of an "Earth-duplicate," a realm seeking verisimilitude that mimics our own history, regardless of the time period in which students chose to place their

character/avatar, an “Earth-variant,” wherein the rules of the world are bent to allow for elements of magical realism (a good example would be J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* universe, or the late Anne Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles* series), and finally, a “New World,” which allowed not only for high-fantasy analogues crafted with entirely different systems of flora/fauna, habitants, magic, etc., but unique worlds comprised entirely of psychic interiority and/or computer simulation.

Students also received, in addition to the course syllabus, an “Epoch & Deck Manual,” and “Dice Reconfiguration Sheet.” In all classroom materials, I referred to all students as “players” for the purpose of solidifying the game-like nature of the course and its respective processes. Materials distributed physically included gaming dice (four-sided [d4], six-sided [d6], ten-sided [d10], and twenty-sided [d20]). Students also received a deck of cards (60), weekly progress sheets, collaboration sheets, and other miscellaneous drawing tools used for illustration and map-making. Following the first course, the only materials I have revisited here are those concerning the card decks, which contain various categories whose functions are color-coded. Black cards, or *signifiers*, require players to, at minimum, incorporate the word into their weekly writing, though they may wish to progress the term towards a larger metaphor, theme, or other literary device. Secondly, blue cards denoted narrative structure such as the text’s point-of-view, tense, or specific literary device.

Lastly, red cards denoted *action*, which afforded players the option of performing solitary/individual actions, or collective/communal action(s) that affected one or multiple texts, their worlds, the trajectory of their projects, and/or the very rules provided in another document. I perceived red cards as potentially the most influential of any given card in a deck, expressly for their capacity to outright overturn the very governance—perceived or real—of the game

mechanics themselves. Of course, students would be limited still—they were not permitted to negatively affect one another’s projects and would first require consent before initiating any kind of collaboration. In later versions of the game, collaboration of course occurred as a fundamental component of play, with modifications made to the core set of rules to accommodate this change.

A major game-initializing modification I made in 2019 and 2020 iterations of the course concerned the decks themselves. For fall 2018’s course I made the decks on my own from relatively inexpensive 500-piece blank card packets I ordered online—generating sixty-card decks for eighteen students was massively time-consuming, but it was a process I desired to undertake for my research practices. For future classes, I had the students enrolled create their own cards. I kept red, action cards the same, mandating the same number for each student, though I altered the pool from semester to semester, desiring to experiment with new potential effects that might be rendered upon the game’s mechanics. For blue cards, students choose from a large pool of literary devices affecting prose, poetry, or hybrid forms—a process that required students to familiarize themselves with many terms they hadn’t seen before, terms that normally in a creative writing workshop, they would be forced to study and then mimic.

Here, students chose conventional devices specifically for the purpose of which creative writing practices they thought would lead to the direct enrichment of their projects, as opposed to leaving solely their interests as incentive. Additionally, should students wish to alter their deck, they could use actions cards to do so. Although, I must admit that I did encounter unique circumstances where students expressed reasonable rationale for altering their decks outside of game mechanics, due to their interests in a specific direction they wished to take, and I perceived it as unethical to forbid such actions—these weren’t arbitrary desires resulting from a frustration in the game parameters or one’s own prior choices. Black cards (signifiers) underwent changes

as well. Rather than deciding a pool of terms beforehand, students generated their own pools. However, I encouraged them, across all sections where this change got implemented, to choose words of significance as opposed to randomization.

The opening prompt for *ARTIFICE X* provides what Francesca Coppa calls a “character script” that is commonplace among many role-playing games and other popular culture IP’s (Intellectual Properties) with a heavy fan base. As such, it eases students into roleplay, via familiarity, through the position of immersion and subsequent control over an “explorer” of sorts. While this explorative onset was merely intended as a tool of immersion into the integral, beginning stages of world-formation for each student, it is worth noting that more than two-thirds of the class in the fall 2018 section departed from the exploratory nature of the opening prompt and immediately sought to develop unique consciousness and history for their virtual character/avatar (CA). Game mechanics necessitated that all students focus on the beginning Epochs—or world-themes—of Geography, Astronomy, Cartography, Flora/Fauna, and Meteorology. These five Epochs were selected explicitly for the requirement that each student situate their virtually simulated CA within a world. After completing the opening prompt, various drawing and drafting materials were distributed to students for the purpose of creating visual referents of the various sights (if applicable) their respective CA encountered one they had passed through their door and into whatever world it was that students had begun forming in their text. In addition to being given the option of illustrating without restriction, students were instructed to draw a map of their world beyond the immediate terrain they may have begun to describe in their text. They were also instructed to illustrate the planet their CA inhabited, and any other celestial bodies in the cosmos surrounding that world. These two “God’s-Eye” activities were intended to further solidify the relationship and/or unconscious divide between

student-writer and CA, thus more adequately situating the CA as a virtual being within a gaming world—one under the control of an outside entity, or player.

On a weekly basis following the opening prompt—or as noted otherwise in the syllabus, students completed a round of gameplay. At the beginning of each round, I distributed a weekly progress sheet in which students would be able to keep track of the date/week of the semester. In addition, students tracked their world-level. Each student embarked from the opening prompt and began formation of their worlds at Level 5, but from thereon, should students choose to do so, collaborations with other students could result in an increase in world-level beyond the rate as determined by weekly playing/writing requirements. Students received their decks, prepared by myself, and between the eighteen of them, shared two sets of nine dice for gameplay functions.

Each deck consisted of three categories of cards. Red cards indicated actions to be taken, blue cards indicated structural requirements of the text to be produced (e.g., poem, motif, dialogue), and black cards indicated a signifier that must be used in the accompanying text, whether it be semantic, symbolic, or thematic in nature. Students shuffled their decks regularly, often multiple times, at the beginning of each round of play. Students used a twenty-sided die to select their Epochs, or world-theme, and a four-sided die to draw cards. After rolling dice and drawing cards, students recorded their activities on the progress sheets. Other features of the progress sheets include a line to indicate which cards students would *not* be using, and thus placing into their Burn Deck, whether or not they were currently working on a collaboration with another students, and finally, whether or not they had drawn a Tarot card from the Zodiac Deck.

This play-time portion of each class session in the first few weeks consumed upwards of 30-minutes of the 75-minute class time, though students quickly adapted to the process and expedited their rolls and card draws to 15-20 minutes beyond Week 6. These practices remained



stable across all four sections, and the foremost reason for the lengthier usages of time can be attributed to the intense communication students held with one another and myself. Some students chose not to read the game's rules, while others found them difficult to remember. When announcing their intentions, others would often be corrected by their peers, or I myself would be hailed to resolve confusion regarding whether specific actions were permitted. This impacted my first semester using the game, leaving me frustrated but recognizing the pattern associated with my other courses where I struggle to get students to remember what critical information the syllabus contains.

In retrospect, I'm surprised I didn't anticipate this. In the semesters following, I considered whether I would "quiz" students on the rules or implement some device in the game that would test player knowledge of said rules. I didn't want these measures to be so explicitly connected to a grade, as I was aware that some of my colleagues have, in the past, administered a syllabus quiz for a grade. I spent a lot of time designing rules that could be broken, and did one apply a sensible level of scrutiny, manipulated in a way that would provide a very different experience with the game. It is worth noting that a small number of participants over the course of all semesters did elect to attempt "breaking" the game. In most cases, though, the students decided not to take the rule-breaking action, perceiving it would create far too much chaos for their projects.

As instructor, I was involved most abundantly throughout the semester in these gaming processes, and beyond serving as a resource for game rules and potential application of cards drawn, some card functions required further duties. For instance, the "draw primer" card required the selection of a card bearing an image from a game called *Dixit*, whose deck I held in my possession. I kept these cards face down, so that students would not be able to see which image

they would draw. These images “primed” the weekly writing—students chose in what manner, whether a small detail, or some comprehensive message inspired by its perceived totality. I emphasized avoidance to give feedback when solicited for an image’s meaning, or how to use it, using instead a strategy of questions to redirect the student back to the image, or towards a concept parallel to their current rhetorical situation—finding meaning in an image to instrumentalize in their own creative practices.

Similarly, certain actions of gameplay necessitated a draw from the Zodiac Deck, a deck of tarot cards that I held in my possession. Students elected the nature of their horoscope. For example, most tarot decks contain their own instruction manual that outlines not only the relatively concrete suit configurations (e.g., major and minor arcana, four suits of swords, wands, cups, and coins), but the specific inspirations behind the uniqueness of any given deck, which varies greatly. Of interest for the purposing of allowing students to use a horoscope as part of their generative process, however, the manual’s instructions for different types of horoscopes—their reasons and the nature of their messages—garnered the most attention. Most students favored either a single-card draw, or the three-card configuration that could be used to divine messages related to “past, present, future” or “mind/body/spirit.” Whether or not these messages pertained to the CA or the virtual world writ large, students decided on their own or in conversation with one another. Draws of the “Wish” card (when included as part of the action card pool) from a player’s deck also required further dialogues and/or collaboration to ensue, further lengthening the round of gameplay. While collaborations could take place at any time during the semester and could potentially further extend gameplay processes at the beginning of each class session, they were created specifically for the purpose of implementing into the gameplay structure of *ARTIFICE X* a sense of productive competition, yet students largely chose

to fulfill the requirement to perform at least one collaboration with another student until nearly the due date of the component. Students generally weren't too private about the nature of their worlds, but interest in how CA's in each respective world would navigate or experience each world in narrative or poetic form only continued to grow as a topic of interest, especially after the first workshop. When it came time for collaborations, many did not wish to risk interference in another's project, or the worlds were simply too different to align with their interests.

During each class session, worlds evolved towards a new state, or "Epoch" through dialogue, gameplay, and collaboration. As a class, we also engaged dialogue with existing world-building projects, their maps, their geographies, and as a class collectively worked to assist in the devising of others' worlds with available materials, sometimes drawing our terrains of experience with our own projects in direct conversation with popular culture IPs or any other source material we might sample. I did not make too many changes to these initial three weeks across all four sections over the course of the two years of its experimentation. Nonetheless, I did implement, in the final section (Spring 2020), the option to revisit an Epoch after midterms, as Epochs became unpredictable, due to being determined by dice rolls for each person or group onward. Additionally, I noted how students also began to form their own strategies in approaching a specific Epoch, depending on what they observed from another player, or from what they were able glean from my responses.

Students' questions, when orienting themselves to gameplay—in sum—largely centered around either a state of confusion about what they could do in response to what the game mechanics presented to them before they had initiated their writing of an accompanying text, or they asked for advice to determine whether their planned actions were the *right* course of action. I continually insisted that there existed no wrong actions, save for those which could be

perceived as destructive or violent to another, that the game only afforded consequences, and if a student felt they had made a mistake in the plotting of their narratives, in the building of their world, or in the nature of their CA, they should simply approach the circumstance as any challenge—that with enough study and skill they might find a way to resolve what they observed as an obstacle. Often, such issues quickly resolved themselves either in private conference with myself, through dialogue with other students during gameplay, or during workshop. For example, many issues took the form of how exactly to develop the attributes of each Epoch's themes, and if things didn't resolve in a satisfactory manner to the student, they often chose to use game functions to decide for them (as in, assigning outcomes to numbers and rolling a dice, flipping a coin, etc.). Alternatively, they would proceed without further address or return to the conflict at a later time, a process most writers are quite familiar with.

Students arranged their accompanying texts in a Player's Handbook, organizing their writings primarily, in the linear fashion that mirrored our weekly schedule, yet for the required three workshop sessions in each of the four sections, I asked to fulfill a word-count requirement of 1000-1500 words for their submissions. Students made selections from their accompanying texts, revised, or form an entirely new piece, taking that work as inspiration. Should they wish to perform game mechanics for the workshop piece specifically, I permitted them to do so (though this rarely occurred). For the first workshop, students read a portion of their work and then remained silent as their peers offered suggestions for revision and celebrated what they enjoyed about the project. Once this process completed, students asked further questions of their peers. For workshops two and three, students prepared five questions beforehand, attaching them to their work what they would like their peers to focus on specifically during the workshop. I wanted to provide the opportunity for a variety of feedback in these workshops, but avoid too the

commonplace “cone of silence” or other methods I am familiar with. For instance, in all three workshops, respondents handed a prepared copy of more detailed feedback to both the students being workshopped and myself. This preparation gave students the opportunity to reconsider their prepared remarks during the workshop. Should their thoughts be expanded, challenged, or reconsidered during the workshop, as others shared perhaps the very same or related insights, they could then make note of it, but the typed feedback supplemented too the feedback they were instructed to leave on the physical manuscripts themselves.

In addition to these three workshops, students completed a variety of writing exercises devised by myself that designed to create greater engagement with various writing practices that I determined from the first workshop to be areas of needed attention. As such, these in-class writing exercises featured concerns such as dialogue, point of view, metaphor, verb tense, modifiers (describing various physical sensations, sounds), rhythm, onomatopoeia, etc. Students uploaded their work to online folders for assessment but were also instructed to include revised copies of this work in their Player’s Handbook. Students also included a fourth manuscript that was, in nature, a deliberate revision of prior work. This manuscript wasn’t workshopped, but it took into consideration feedback gained during prior workshops, falling under another requirement that at least seventy-five percent of its content was original. On the final class day, students delivered a brief oral presentation of their worlds, their CA’s, and where they saw the project going in the future, if they had determined they would continue working on it. Those students who were more artistically inclined in the visual arts tended to have more illustrations, while others preferred to demonstrate how they had arranged their pieces and rounds of play in their player’s handbooks.

Assessment was performed through participation and successful completion of the required number of written pieces for each of the fifteen modules of the game, the course's three workshops, writing exercises, a revised manuscript, a final oral presentation, and attendance.

Quantitative data derived from the fall 2018 semester surveys (see Appendix A) unfortunately leaves more inconclusive results than desired, due to a lack of participation in the second survey, which unfortunately occurred on a day near the end of the semester when attendance was low, despite my careful reminders that attendance was crucial for that day. Even so, some important information related to questions concerning terminology is more apparent. Students seemed to have gained over the course of the semester either an increased understanding of their own activities as game-oriented, or, as they began to take on more gaming activities, they tailored their identities to begin including activities associated with gaming. These possibilities is more definitionally situated and not a particular focus of the study, but interesting nonetheless, and may prove useful to other writing researchers seeking to study how specific facets of writing identity become adopted (or shed) by students at various stages in their academic degrees (this course featured a variety of underclassmen from all four years). It may grant some insight onto which individuals, and at which point in their academic careers, are more open to shifts in ideas regarding their own identities in relation to gaming. However, each individual may have very unique ideas regarding what a "gamer" is, and what the criteria should be for such a category (such as, the amount of time spent gaming each week).

More pertinently, and as expected, students primarily located their gaming activities within social networks of family and friends. This question (#7) has been omitted from Appendix A, along with question #9, which details whether students perceive table-top role-playing game models as benefitting classroom spaces, and if so, in which other disciplines. While at least one

student identified as being an avid table-top, role-playing gamer, several others indicated they had played MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) before, yet the majority of the class had not. Despite many students admitting to occasionally playing games, or being a player of some of the more viral games currently (such as *Fortnite* and *League of Legends*), they were more keen to definitively situate their gaming activities within recognizable, traditional modes of play (chess, card games, outdoor games). Nevertheless, quantitative findings (albeit lacking full participation in Survey #2) are still sufficient in participation to support an increased understanding and decidedly positive reception to a table-top and role-playing game such as *ARTIFICE X* in the creative writing classroom. And as students suggest in their survey responses, these models would benefit other disciplines of study such as STEM, Accounting/Finance, Education, Recreational Therapies, History, other English courses, Psychology, Theatre, and Fine Arts.

The perceptual shift in terms of how students both define and situate their identities within classrooms attempting to mirror table-top and/or virtual game space was not an explicit aim of the study—rather, the questions in the surveys endeavored to examine student literacy with various gaming activities. More explicitly, the surveys sought to establish how students defined “gaming” and with which activities they considered themselves to be “gamers” to evaluate this distinction and how it may impinge on the presence of gaming in the creative writing classroom (and in other classrooms on campus). This focus was crucial to appropriately contextualizing qualitative data retrieved from observing/participating in student communications and combing through their work to ascertain how various networks of play, as are common within gaming communities, would establish themselves within a classroom space attempting to model such a virtual environment. However, perceptual shifts in these settings

where the nuances of identity are concerned may certainly be of greater interest to scholars working to explore how writing and gamer identities are intertwined and complimented by one another.

I detail some much-needed additions to the research parameters below, the most important of these needed changes being multiple interviews of the participants before, during, and after their completion of the course for the purpose of providing additional context. The qualitative parameters of the research situated three primary research questions as follows:

1. What benefits do students gain from the integration of world-building, role-playing game strategies in an undergraduate creative writing workshop?
2. What specific attributes of such an instructional device do students most positively respond to, and in what way(s)?
3. Does the implementation of such a gaming device afford participants the capacity for innovation beyond the parameters of more traditional writing workshops and creative writing instruction?

Qualitative data assessment revealed the distinct role of compatibility between course design novelty and familiarity in producing an environment where networks of communication and play directly impinge upon textual production through both collective and subjective means. Students overwhelmingly found the *ARTIFICE X* world-building game new and fresh, though there were some students who, in being familiar with the analogues from which it draws inspiration (*Dungeons & Dragons*, for instance), quickly adapted to its uniqueness through their own prior game-playing and community-building experiences. However, most students used information they learned from their in-class experiences and from what they observed in others to continually adapt their strategies, writing productivity, and competencies with the game mechanics. For



example, students became especially adept and excited by the gameplay functions involving the weekly dice rolls that determined the number of function cards that students drew from their decks. In later iterations of the workshop, this excitement also included the ways students initially configured their decks or made alterations at a later date, whether through surgical precision to exploit gaming mechanics, or through randomization to exploit chance, surprise, and inspiration.

To be precise, students quickly developed an understanding of the various risks associated with specific mechanics. For example, repeated dice rolls during card draw sometimes provided advantage, as students desire specific cards, but if performed too early in the semester, one's deck might still be too large (students discarded the cards they drew, thus decreasing over time the size of their decks—these used cards remained in possession, but in as a separate “burn deck”). The number of cards-in-hand, with respect to how many cards they held in their burn decks, at any given point might constitute a different set of decisions, depending on desired outcome. For example, discarding a slightly unwanted card would perhaps take up space in the burn deck that would be needed later, as burn decks were given a “cap” (students could elect each round to transition a burn-deck card to the status of “full discard,” thus permanently removing their access to it), yet holding too many cards in hand for any given round could potentially lead to an array of complex functions one would need to implement into the required accompanying text.

Furthermore, depending on which Epoch (worldbuilding-theme) students found themselves working with, the “less is more” adage was observed by some, while others shifted their strategy away from such a conservative approach and sought to enact a high degree of activity, vocalizing a desire to cause a certain kind of mayhem for the purpose of seeing what

could come of such activity. Students sometimes made changes or expressed their desire to do so based on their dissatisfaction with the outcomes of their decisions, however, in other rare instances, they pursued changes based on the feedback of their peers. By majority, these moments concerned protagonists and supporting characters—how to best envision the conflicts at the center of their narratives with merit, but without enacting common tropes, cliches, or harmful ideas. This indeed concerns master narratives that play some role in shaping the thinking behind participant approaches to the game. Most often, these encounters provided an opportunity for discussion. In rare instances did I need to directly advise students of a potentially problematic approach to their playing of the game, but I did not need to intervene once, as when apprised of the matters, those students also wished to make appropriate changes, often consulting their peers.

Decision-making dialogues concerning matters as these overwhelmingly took place between students after their respective card draws, whether verbally or non-verbally. Students both spoke and listened to one another—asked questions and eavesdropped on other ongoing conversations, requested insight from myself, thus either copying the strategies they observed, or making entirely different decisions based upon how they perceived such decisions would affect (whether severely, benign, neutral, etc.) the required accompanying text ultimately produced from said round of gameplay. It is difficult to overstate the degree to which communication networks beyond conventional creative writing classroom models were established in perpetually maturing, transforming arrays, depending on how students perceived “knowledge” of gameplay in relation to themselves, others, and the respective worlds involved. And many participants found novel ways within their group communications to overcome perceived limits or pivot in strategy to accomplish a given goal that the game’s boundaries might affect, speaking again to that experience of queerness necessitating alternative action and/or long-term strategy. Across all

four sections where I used this experimental workshop model, I should again draw attention to the Spring 2020 class, where a team constructed a writer's room, giving each member of their group a specific designation covering responsibility for various characters and/or narrative threads. As mentioned, this group also met outside of our class to do their writings, as most of the class time they chose to spend conversing with one another—strategizing their upcoming writing session and its particularities, the *where* and *when* it would take place, for instance.

I was not privy to these meetings, nor did I perform any kind of debrief where these students detailed for me the nature of their proceedings. And I should note, once our class departed for spring break, we did not return to campus, as that was the time when Covid-19's spread throughout the United States and resulted in the shutdown of many states and their universities, including Illinois State University in Normal, IL, where this research took place. As we transitioned to a state of online instruction, I like many others found myself needing to make use of many electronic tools of which some I only possessed minimal familiarity. With some students I made use of Discord for meetings and collaboration, whereas with others I used Zoom. Students did not have their decks, however, so I had to perform card draws for them on camera. For dice rolls, I instructed students to download an app called *RPG Simple Dice*. Using this app to calculate digital rolls, they shared the results with everyone in attendance.

Online class sessions of course consumed a great deal of time, but due to the stressors that the pandemic began exhibiting in everyone's lives, some tailoring to course requirements was necessary. The conditions afforded some opportunity as well to explore what an online version of the class could entail—my ideal scenario for *ARTIFICE X* envisions a completely virtual interface that incorporates as many of its analog counterparts. This kind of an interface would need to be developed from scratch, which of course would require a large sum of money

secured mostly likely by a research grant to hire those skilled in the specialized kind of code for such a tool. Development would require an unknown amount of time, too, as would the need to test such a platform. For my research here I wished, however, to pursue a version that emphasized accessibility across resource availability, whether concerning prior knowledge, material components, and even time constraints, as the sixteen-week semester presents its own challenges, in terms the degree to which students might develop a robust literacy for analog gaming mechanics, so I would anticipate that a digital version of *ARTIFICE X* would present numerous other challenges on this front.

For example, the “Wish” card itself proved somewhat of an enigma to students, as the rulebook only forecloses on the action card being used in any way that leads to its duplication, wishing for more wishes, or creating gameplay effects that are potentially destructive or not granted permission by other players. The card serves in one theoretical sense as a mirror to the blank page, an oscillatory representation of all possibilities and none (Turner), depending on how one acts, what one decides. This led students who drew the card to often place it in their burn deck for later keeping, or to use it for a purpose that repeated/expanding upon a mechanical function of gameplay they were already familiar with, such as wishing for another roll, or a specific number of cards to draw. Students recognized these actions as cheats, as an “easy way out,” thus having an encounter with their own self-imposed limitations on creative thinking. They expressed desire to maximize their use of the game’s functions, in order to continue developing their respective worlds and character/avatar(s), but they also expressed various fears regarding the consequences of a wish, factoring into their thinking the need to again draw the wish card should they desire to undo their actions.

There are many significant conclusions to draw here. First, while the interactions and expressions might suggest a dichotomy of “good creator” and “bad creator,” thus revealing the degree to which a role-playing apparatus increases personal incentive and sense of self in relation to the specific products required to be tailored within the creative writing workspace, I instead propose that, again, various functions of the *ARTIFICE X* game impose the queer-metamodern oscillations of impossible possibility, a position in which one must, no matter the outcome, decide, generate, and reflect. Across all four sections, students simultaneously enjoyed wrestling with these unpredictable facets of the project, their decisions often creating freedoms while simultaneously suggesting the imposition of undesired limitations.

Second, while others within our classroom spaces encountered the same conflicts, such confrontations drove those collisions with their perceived Self towards a more communally developed perspective of sharing, one they assessed with one another through dialogue, rather than choosing to comport themselves from a more solitary position, a value that cannot be overstated in a creative writing game project that emphasizes collaboration and communal practices. Thirdly, student concerns regarding generative tasks shifted dramatically, a support system emerging from the establishing of direct lines of communication and investment in one another’s projects to such a degree that the question of “what to write,” or, what to do about writer’s block (a key problem/concern in the creative writing classroom) became quickly addressed and resolved, allowing for a communicative shift to the importance of context. For example, students wished to assess their decisions prior to writing, bringing into conversation in most instances the perceived meritocratic outcomes to one another’s works, or, notions attached to outcomes in how another person’s writing/story was achieving, or could achieve, “peak performance.” That is to say, students rarely remained private about what was happening with

their work in terms of “plot,” electing to thoroughly examine the effects of their narrative and worldbuilding decisions. While a couple of these students shared another class (or sorority) with one another, the majority did not, and these networks of communication only continued to intensify as the semester progressed (e.g., achieving a unique state with the writer’s room group from Spring 2020), there too increased the amount of good rapport and sharing between students during rounds of play and workshops.

The most significant outcome of these studies concerning *ARTIFICE X* would be an acknowledgment to the meta-productive components of its own construct—how one produces out of an array of productions, how one revises those structures in response to the nature of one’s producing and that of others. For example, my research methodology’s initial data, while interesting, lacks the perspective that thorough interviews on such work and a stronger sense of each student’s experiences during the semester would provide. Since was not conducting IRB research for each of the four semesters, this is an oversight I would wish to correct, moving forward. Furthermore, I believe an exit interview conducted by an individual other than myself, perhaps with another researcher, instructor, or even another student in the class, would yield some very interesting and valuable information regarding some specific mechanics of gameplay and decision-making that neither the surveys, nor player handbooks and interviews conducted by myself can attest to.

Integrating the pre-determined role of “researcher” into this particular version of *ARTIFICE X*—thus making students accountable to relate their own experiences in an uptake document as part of the course’s assessment—could potentially resolve this issue, though I would anticipate that in an undergraduate setting, the particular class level and thus experience with research would impact such a component. However, more advanced undergraduate creative

writing courses beyond the introductory course could comfortably implement this research, particularly a majors course, where those seeking to enter an MFA or an eventual PhD program in creative writing would find themselves becoming potentially acquainted with the problems of scholarship the field of creative writing concerns itself with, but also, the rigorous expectations of programs requiring theory and research as part of their course curriculum, not only matters of craft.

I have posited predetermined roles and other modes of “priming” students and their work more explicitly, though, seeking to omit as much divergence during gameplay as possible, in order to emphasize the generative capacity of the model (in addition to conducting research on individuals and their responses to such pedagogy). In another version of this game, I envision its gameplay pursuing Spring 2020’s writer’s-room strategy—occurring under the authority of a collective body purposed towards a specific mission. In this model, students find their CA’s together in the same world following the opening prompt as a unified team given a specific purpose. The model takes inspiration from *Star Trek’s* “Away Team,” wherein select individuals of various expertise embark on a mission to gather data from a strange new world, generally for the purpose of resolving an issue related to their spacecraft, though not always distinct or mutually exclusive from a confliction initially invisible to the starship’s crew and captain.

This structure would perhaps remedy the areas of interest regarding collaboration (which I will elaborate on below), but it would also yield a high degree of information regarding the role-playing mechanics and interactions. For fall 2018, the first version of *ARTIFICE X*, I did have some tangential interest in the various networks of communication that students crafted from decided and undecided channels of communication, but I simply wanted to observe these formations in the classroom, and students, from my observations, communicated and

collaborated in ways that confirmed the continuance of gameplay and strategy formation outside the classroom. Interviews and/or radical reconfiguring of gameplay, I believe, would more concretely lay bare the specific communicative acts in these networks of play. However, the imposition of hierarchy (as in the “Away Team” hypothetical) necessitates caution, but all the same, invites an arguably elemental directive nascent to science-fiction—the pursuit of solutions to present-day problems and dilemmas through visionary experimentation.

While I intended, originally, for collaboration to curtail what I had conceptualized as an inherent correlation between notions of table-top role-playing games and an unspoken sense of competition, it turned out that most students were perfectly content to avoid the collaboration assignment until its due date had nearly arrived, thus my integrating of the component into regular rounds-of-play. This may in part be due to some of the old habits and myths regarding one in solitude writing away on their project, but this aspect of the system needs to be more integral if there is to be any longer-term study of collaboration that extends beyond dialogue and the singular requirement submitted by student pairs and/or teams. For instance, another aspiration related to collaborations I did not necessarily achieve was the observation of single authorship collapsing into co-authorship. Though students remained in close proximity regarding their strategizing, much of these conversations concerned methods for preserving one another’s intellectual property as opposed to creating something truly novel and unique. However, others adapted rules so that their creations would be quarantined to a “pocket universe,” or they simply declared the resulting narrative to be a “dream” experienced by their CA. In a true collapse of singular authorship, I anticipate an interview process and mining of student work for corresponding textual artifacts that would indicate this activity, when occurring. However, in a more controlled, genre-specific version of the game, it might be exercised as part of a



hypothetical Away-Team's unifying purpose, dilemma, and/or conflict. For instance, a mission statement, where the establishment of a relational structure promotes Self-discovery along lines of a unified, communal nature with others.

Even so, gameplay strictures perhaps account for the most significant terrain for revisiting and restructuring. Such strictures would include a mandated student interaction with the rule book, Epoch and Deck Manuals, a restructuring of Player's deck functions with respect to the game's Epoch system, a reduced number of workshops, and the introduction of different strictures altogether which would be, by design, a means of bypassing student tendencies observed over the course of these studies. I see the negating of "play it safe" strategies and those in which minimal completion of requirements as tantamount, but therein lies an underlying problem and evidence of the oppressive nature of the institution—surveillance and threat of punishment. No matter the degree to which students might be incentivized to participate, no matter to what degree an instructor grants students affordances and/or agency to usurp, such institutional power can never fully vanish.

While the issue of student interaction with the rule book and manuals is easily resolved via some component like a quiz or knowledge check of another nature, I foresee the better solution as seeking to address the situation through a lens in which the outcome increases collaboration. Therefore, one possible alternative envisions students performing a required dialogue with one another regarding the rules and manuals at the beginning of the semester and formulating questions, rather than receiving direct instruction from myself. A reduced number of workshops (from three manuscripts to two) would create approximately three additional weeks of time—plenty for this activity and any others (additional writing exercises, rounds of play, etc.), so that students could increase their knowledge of the game mechanics and their own

developing grammars of play. However, the course could potentially run more smoothly in an intermediate or advanced workshop with students who are not only just experiencing the nature of a writing workshop. I would of course need to run the model in those courses to confirm that hypothesis, and in a graduate-level course too (though that is another matter beyond the scope of this project).

The introduction of new strictures I foresee as necessary would, again, involve those specifically targeting an increase in collaboration. While the game currently situates Epochs as being determined by dice rolls, Epochs could alternatively be altered to induce collaboration, thus ensuring a collaborative text is produced. This option seems more expedient and generative than the Instructor randomly imposing an element or collaboration requirement to all players at periodic moments throughout the semester, however the drawback to such an alteration is the circumstance of a student or multiple students rolling repeated collaborative Epochs week after week, and thus being forced to collaborate far more than others. In addition, it is possible that students could be granted power to eliminate the collaborative component from their dice rolls permanently, though with this power would also come the potential for its abuse. Interestingly, however, in fall 2018, students used the “wish” card to eliminate signifier cards from their Player’s deck, they desiring to access more cards relating to actions (red) and textual (blue) concerns, whereas the fall 2019 sections overwhelmingly decided to place the card in their burn decks when drawing it, either stating they found its properties too ambiguous or too powerful.

These are precisely the types of oscillatory, situation-based, and entirely unpredictable subjective actions that a metamodernist approach seeks to exploit—the possibility of both failure and success for the sake of doing—generating effects that invoke the Self towards resolution of problem via exploration in experimental content. But revising said structure to more intimately

tie one focus of the study (collaboration) to its frame could quite potentially result in even further resistance just as well as an outcome where the desired remedy occurs. Regardless, I see the incorporating of collaboration into dice rolls—leaving things to chance—as the more acceptable modification at this juncture, despite what the “Away Team” postulate might suggest (however, I do wish to explore it, too). I would similarly place key player’s deck functions in to dice rolls, as students elected, across all four sections, not to draw as many of these cards as they expressed a desire to do so. Another problem here is that the decks simply had too many signifier cards (black), an amount that limited the probability of drawing the action and textual cards. I have determined signifier cards might need to be eliminated from gameplay practices entirely, or serve instead as a similar interrupt that the *zodiac* and *Dixit* cards have provided. Additionally, various other actions cards were rarely played when drawn, the most recurrent of these being the “trade” card, which as its name suggests, granted collaboration through exchange of cards, concepts, and/or entire texts.

Like the “wish” card, most students chose to place “trade” in their burn deck, thus avoiding it entirely. While some of these avoidances of risk denote a “play it safe” mentality, it could also indicate the desire of some students to quarantine their worlds and narratives from the influences of others. Therefore, it could be that the larger issue of minimal textually-evident collaboration stems from the individuated, subjectively-oriented design of *ARTIFICE X*, however, a more collaborative network situated within one world, as opposed to a world-per-student or student-group ratio may not resolve this issue. Students could simply perceive the term “gaming” as inhering a competitive quality, one that sublimates collaboration under a need to protect their IP from outside influence. Students may not trust that others will fully understand or appreciate their projects, though they may also desire to maintain more control over their

projects, another reason for their hesitation to use certain actions cards that invoked unknowable changes and/or processes (such as the “draw primer” cards that made use of the *Dixit* image cards).

Admittedly, a great deal of further research is required to continue exploring how best to optimize *ARTIFICE X* as a creative-writing pedagogical model. Currently, my results reveal what I had suspected from the onset—student responses demonstrate (as supported by the work generated and quantitative data collected via surveys from fall 2018) that table-top role-playing games such as *ARTIFICE X* not only contribute a high degree of benefits to students (with regard to community and personal investment in their work), but that students see such a pedagogical model overwhelmingly in the positive, that despite its flaws, they are more incentivized to produce and immerse themselves into the learning environment of the creative writing workshop space when their obligations are situated as “play” and “gaming.” It may be that these terms serve to disrupt student ideas about the academic work and rigor they will be asked to engage with in the classroom, due to the notions of familiarity they bring, because most everyone has played games before, but these activities are not necessarily thought of as being a fundamental aspect of a university course (the exception being those courses where gaming or game theory would be the object of study). And contributing perhaps to the perceived alleviating of the pressures of a university classroom were my assessments—most of these weekly components received completion grades. In addition to meeting the basic criteria for these assignments, I primarily assessed learning in terms of how students challenged their own ideas and presumptions about their own work from week to week, a process that culminated in a longer, written self-assessment at the end of the semester.

In all four sections, these assessments confirmed the shared intimate connections between students and their crafted story-worlds. They sought both to address their internal struggles and those they perceived as currently threatening the continuity of their lives as both individuals, and members of a larger community and world. What remains to be seen, however, is the full capacity of this metamodern creative writing workshop gaming tool. Specifically, to what extent might it address more concretely, and with greater collaboration among student player-writers, the capacity for redress or real-world social, historical, and/or cultural dilemmas? Furthermore, in what ways does *ARTIFICE X*'s transition to a full digital model either promote and/or restrict said capacities, or lead to unforeseen effects and usages beyond the scope of its intent?

The central outcomes gathered from both qualitative and quantitative data do not explicitly affect the trajectory or inherent structure of the model as it might potentially appear in other discourse communities, should one seek to adopt its model for their own practices. It is not my aim to develop alternative models to be used in other types of classroom spaces beyond creative writing workshops, but such potential for gaming models such as *ARTIFICE X* cannot be ignored.

## CHAPTER III: PERMUTATION—METALOGUE BETA

### V.1

I wanted to heal.

I wanted a non-binary account of becoming, and therefore, revealing.

This is the apocalypse—the great unfurling of all things hidden. At least, that is my wish. That the roots of my hopes and dreams spring from the soil of my soul a thing of undeniability and reckoning. Whether it be a new Eden, a conundrum, or something I haven't been able to imagine is an uncertainty I have chosen to embrace. Failure too, I accept. In fact, that has been an aim from the beginning. To fail all the way up, or down. *Heaven* and *Hell* I consider myself sharing a kinship to, but for the sake of resisting an overbearance of afterlife nomenclature, let us just say I aim to fail into the afterlife of Before.

#### V.1.1

I've tentatively titled the house, *In Observance of Those Who Walk on Hallowed Ground*. I'm working with categories, here, writ large, but I've been working on developing pieces for some time now, and this is the penultimate moniker for them. It happens like that sometimes. I want to digress for a moment and say that much of my work, while attempting to apprehend and understand the traumas arriving from multiple sites spread across the local present and distant, expansive past, often emerge as a little joke from the flecks. They obsequiously highlight difficulties I experience interacting with both them and my own home.

Of course, this only relates to my social position as a queer person newly exploring their identity as non-binary, gay, and somewhere on the ace spectrum (asexual). Oh, what the hell am I saying? Does it matter?

This whole house is turning against me, I can feel it. Even the dust is laughing now.

I digress. I often find it difficult to delineate a lot of these aspects and first approach a new project in the same manner—from multiple sites. Even if I am thinking, “I think I want to write a poem about this very shit encounter and how it activates my traumas of being unwanted and undesirable because who wants to date someone with HIV anyway?” I am led to thinking about activism and where I fall within that history, even as my most immediate terrains are my body and my disgust of the current state of the medical apparatus—directly experienced on multiple fronts, of course. It is no surprise then, that most of this activity happens on the toilet.

But such a poem can’t happen without talking about the self-contained apocalypse within the house, too. It’s been two years now, by my calculations (granted, they could be VERY wrong), but it doesn’t take away from the fact that, yes, I am still very much living through an apocalypse, and even before that, I was still very much trying to not only keep myself alive, but determine what thriving meant for me—if it was possible—and what that looked like on any given day before these damn strange flecks arrived.

A little bit of specifics here. We can do that. I flip flop between graysexual/grayromantic and demisexual/demiromantic, and who’s to say which is dominant, and who’s the doppelganger? Perhaps I am more of a goblin. The point is, these matters complicate dating encounters, my own very queer-becoming, and my ongoing, long-term struggles associated with grief, reconciliation, artifacts of familial strife, the severe abuse I put myself through because of the severe abuse and neglect I suffered as child.

I was raised in an environment of calamities, you see. One day after the next, never knowing precisely when the next would arrive. I have historically avoided mentioning these in my writing until recently (both in poetry and prose), preferring impenetrable metaphor and

humorous, carnivalesque hellscapes over deliberate acknowledgement. I have tried to paint them but can never seem to find the right color. A blank canvas suits me better.

As a maker I know I am needing to make a few things about all of that, and it is angry and contemptuous for systems, clinics, and the things others make—the things people say and even the thoughts they have. This is an encounter here, dear reader, just as I am encountering myself. This is a door and who knows where it goes. That seems to be the intent of the flecks, if there is any to be had—to drift along, aimlessly, but irreverent and conniving in the knowing full well of the eventuality, my finding, my pursuing.

### **V.1.2**

I have decided to focus instead on a project in which I express as specifically as possible my feelings about HIV doctors and clinic visits. More specifically, the clinic visit where I was first informed of my condition, as there are quite a lot of other notable histories bound up in that. I have begun some of this work already, drafting diagrams of the building's floor plan as best I can from memory, the route I took to get there, and have even begun preliminary construction of a small diorama in which I am being informed for the first time of my condition.

With this piece, I should note that I have become distracted, and also wish to focus on another project I have begun that deals with the category of “the inner child.” I feel I framed that content more so as a rescue mission, but it is also an act of seeing and understanding, because it is also a journey through frightening places. I am regretting now having never learned CPR, or the proper equipment and mechanics of successful, urgent rappelling down a cliffside, but I digress.



I can report that this new project will focus preeminently on featuring spatial and aural attributes in its materials in a manner that may not only be interpreted as autodidactic, but ironic too, and, I hope, without alienating the experiencer. You see, place and sound are both prominent factors regarding my own memories, and it is something that I have written about before, but I don't think I fully understood at the time how to work with it (admittedly I am still ironing out what I perceive could be some challenges).

As you would expect, that the diorama germinated this project concerning the inner child, it is not surprising in the least that I feel a strong pull towards the architecture of my mind. I realize that I should also focus on a sibling piece (or two) wherein it is made clear that the architecture specifically relates to my aims of visualizing the trauma and its schemas itself. Whether this be some kind of monstrous amalgam that contrasts with the spaces where the inner child resides—mostly outdoors and alone in places of solitude like forests and fields, away from all the “noise” in the home—I cannot currently say, however those possibilities do carry some appeal.

### V.2.3

I have begun using a voice recorder while working on my projects, as often, I find myself in a state of verbalizing many of the ideas for the ancillary, sibling projects and/or their modifications. One project in particular I have mentioned before, titled *Letter to the Vastness*, employs both the aether and the exotic matter that began leeching from my bathroom walls some days ago. The two substances seem to pair rather well, however, and after having survived my previous venture through the door of exotic matter, I have been more open to experimenting with

it. I would even go so far as to say that it could potentially lead to a watershed moment. Exciting, yes, but also daunting.

I'm drawing here on some CBT work I did with a therapist (not my current one), and I forget exactly what it is called, but it is the narrativizing of events as they transpire. Some of these were done in session, and others I did on my own, recording them and listening to the playback, for the purposes of cultivating a that distance from the trauma to be able to observe it and not be susceptible to the same triggers.

This category is somewhat just getting started—I want to place it within another regarding different kinds of queer intimacies—though it is connected to the second poem, which belongs to a category I think I mentioned already, the “Letter to...” category. Some of these are prose poems. Others play a little more with stanzas, slant-rhyme, enjambment, and placement on the page. I found myself doing more with line breaks with this poem. A sub-category of these poems speaks directly to dating and hook-up apps, and some of the characters the speaker is writing to show up in other poems, but this poem in particular is addressed to the toxic masculinity that has carved out the voids in others, things that lead to the closed-off-ness of some partners I've had, the specific structuring of intimacy (and sex-acts), the complex politics behind relating in an unspoken manner v. what is spoken—not necessarily meaning these people desire a FWB situation in general, or something explicitly sexual, but they perpetuate a very undefined relationship that involves a lot.

#### **V.7.4**

It has become clear to me through a series of unfortunate encounters that every single person walking the earth harbors within them a belief that they will not easily share, if only for

the troubling nature of said belief. This belief is a core-belief, a pillar of their identity. To *not* believe this thing would result in calamity—their absolute collapse.

#### **V.7.4.1**

I am unsure of what bothers me most about the prior entry. I am disturbed by the presence of these beliefs, but it is equally (if not more) disturbing, the conviction said beliefs demand of those harboring them. And, I might add, that the very nature of these beliefs—their need for seclusion—irrevocably lends to the shock and dismay one experiences, when sudden and unsuspectingly, they are devoutly revealed.

For example, I was recently introduced by my friend Mary to an individual whom I will refer to as Kara. Kara is new to the neighborhood, and being that her circumstance is a struggling to acclimate to new surroundings and the people inhabiting them, Mary suggested she and I could be good friends. Now, some of this can be attributed to Mary's perception of my *own* process of acclimating, but I should pause here to say that I am in the position of placing my friendship with Mary under review; however, that is a discussion for another time.

In the moment of being told by my friend about Kara, I may have experienced what some refer to as flattery, but Mary, in my opinion, has been in my company long enough to know that I am *not* acclimated, and that I do not appreciate surprise middling when it comes to the nature of my relationships, let alone permitting those whom I have only just graduated to the title of “friend” to make evaluations about them. A friend who has just become a friend has not acclimated, that is. So I found Mary quite presumptuous in her assertion, finding myself later, once entrenched in further thought about it, re-evaluating my appraisal of all her intentions in all her actions I had witnessed.

I was composing a poem when Kara first stopped by my coral domicile. This poem certainly has its origins in a swirl of thoughts and late-night pondering (you will recall I have mentioned the trouble I sometimes have, trying to sleep), though it materialized on the page via handwriting. I don't normally handwrite with my prose, where most of my writing activity takes place, and, while I do experiment with formal qualities like line break and enjambment on the page, I do find myself tweaking that considerably more once I begin composing on my typewriter.

In the hours of that gray morning, I had worked through about four stanzas, deciding them unfit, and began again. Not a full-day-restart, mind you, just the writing. I had thought I would just try one, but as you know, it led, inexorably, to others. Doors opened and doors opened, and doors opened and the halls seemed connected. And if not, I tried to make other doors. I stepped away and returned, walked around in my living room. I avoided distractions. Food is a distraction. So is waste. Pondering waste and how much of it you have accumulated can become a problem very quickly. Trust me on this.

But I cannot digress. This was writing time. I write while doing lots of other things. I'm sure I must have said this a few times by now, and that I've discovered other ways of writing some lines. I use a chalk board because I enjoy the interactive nature of it. I am moving, taking dust and making words with it. Sometimes when not using the chalkboard, I write by hand and then spill coffee on the papers. Mix them up. See what happens. End with a creamy brown splash right near the middle of the end of last three lines, right above the word *survivor*.

All the while, I was examining the thread(s) and their layers and whether the lasagna was getting too thick for the pan, as I fancy multiple meanings in words, lines, etc, and sometimes can't tell if it's too dense for readers to access though I tend to set those worries aside in the

writing and just go). This process is a process, but it is quite different from my late hour composing that sometimes happens while I'm trying to fall asleep, but I eventually make it through to some kind of result, even if that means the product remains unfinished, per se. For example, if my brain is going between 12-4am, then I get it in my phone—a fragment. My phone is full of fragments. Tiny, fragile little survivors hoping to be scooped up and cannibalized.

Needless to say, I had not considered myself an unsuspecting person, and even after the encounter with Kara, which turned out to be a poor and distracting one, I still consider myself acutely scrutinizing and aware. Perhaps it was the shock of being so quickly spewed upon by a mouth of faith, being swept into the unyielding, dogmatic currents of a devout Christian seeking to drown another in witness testimony. No, if there was one to be called *unsuspecting*, dare I say, ignorant, it was Kara, who had no critical awareness whatsoever towards the overwhelming nature of their uninterrupted deluge of delusion. I had not expected this.

For there could have been no surer evidence of God's absence than my predicament—my history (not to mention the unanswerable agonies of human history)—so I was incredulous but too generous in my listening. Self-indulgent, I admit, though I was not condescending, nor bitter, or begrudging. But I did feel angry after, for having permitted the assault. And yes, dear reader. It *was* an assault, for how could one who had escaped the horrors of Calvinism's cage subject themselves to such rancor even by the remotest conceits of humor?

So I was led to that thought of the previous entry—that even the sanest among us carry on by the purely insane, and having found within myself the fortitude to somehow stomach Kara's righteous, frothing spume of conviction and zeal, I become no exclusion from that claim.

But you already knew that, didn't you?

### **V.11.1**

Can we have a conversation about survivors of rape and trauma writing their experiences into the memoir, and having endured, in a symbolic (and very real) manner, the very same at the hands of the institution in order to be awarded the privilege of doing so in the first place?

### **V.12**

I felt the Earth grow electric, full of wrath, fury, vengeance, and the possibility of movements, of avoidance—perfected as they may have been in their designs through years of discipline, assumed the stultifying character of “no further—no more.” The walls withstood me, withheld the choice of action upon my intention—carcerate lonely things refusing to relinquish their hold on me, they nourishing themselves with my unactionable desires, insatiable rage, and sorrows for all I could not do to simply release myself from a prison of making.

I decided to call what occurred in a myriad of dreamlike days the “emergence.” Such a name seemed fitting, as what I’d observed in the phenomena leading up to this event—incomprehensible, by its own merits—simply paled in comparison to the long-lasting, strange and unknowable that had already been occurring. Prior to the new event, things I called “arbiters” forced their way out of the walls and traveled, constituting pathways between the material world and other, stranger material. The arbiters—these entities, be they messengers or deceivers—took on the appearance of twinkling orange flecks, like the severed, soft and slow twinkling end of a fiber optic line. Little insects, or glowing dust, they traveled aimlessly, and with determination too, to imbricate the air and things I possessed, to objects insisting that a great number of other things had happened, were happening. These objects like heirlooms, trivial keepsakes, to objects I’d touched in passing. There was a mystery here, something hewn from

memory, the correlations, I never stopped believing, spurious, but those little glowing things proved me wrong each time, their networks growing ever denser, their reaches ever more relevant to a history I couldn't refuse to be mine.

But all this proved itself some kind of interregnum for a larger event—this “emergence,” as I stated, when all things reverted to another beginning, to my waking up, as though I'd failed some monumental task of piecing together autobiographic clues, as though someone had pressed a literal “reset” button, re-started the charade of my mind.

But I was no mere video game avatar at the merciless control of some removed, child-other. At least, I didn't believe that, and to prevent myself from some unintentional foreshadowing, or coloring of future thought, I avoided any sincere marshaling of information I gathered from tending towards the validating some vestigial tormentor.

At the beginning of a new attempt, I stirred from my bed, seeing it was morning, or mid-afternoon. I couldn't tell which, due to the cloud-cover's heavy gray pall enshrouding my bedroom, my mind similarly obscured with some cloak of confusion, cut loose from delusion of comfort over which I must have dreamed I could wrest control.

Or was it a terrible nightmare? An odor of charred pumice and souring sea spray clung in a stranger preponderance than I remembered, the unmistakable decay much denser now than before the reset. I realized that it had either eluded me in my previous walkthrough, or in my increasing acclimation to its presence, I had failed to recognize its expanding in thickness, its saturation not unlike the humid plume gathered round a pit of rotting fish and algae. Two days had passed as I slept, or rather, lingered, myself fighting for a rejuvenation as though it were a self-aware and hostile, taunting respite. Just as its ingress began, maliciously it prickled the edges of my senses, the dreamy, dreary tingle of onset violently terminated, my mind and body

thus startled to an alertness that quickly gave way to pure frustration and contempt, for what I perceived as an unreasonably elusive thing I already knew how to do well, like waking up.

Bed-ridden aches, having settled in, forced some recognitions of commitment were I to remain, though this dedication, I quickly understood, could not be characterized by only mental and physical parameters. An alluring tone and subtle vibration grounded with whispering roots further disturbed the atmosphere beyond the growing pungency of burning, festering water.

Damp and yellowed from and ill body's breath, from accumulating perspiration, the thick linens fought against relinquishing their incarcerate grip; untangling my legs from their heavy clutches proved more than I had wagered, so much that my struggle, coupled with my dehydration and lack of movement, produced a familiar, searing pain from an old injury to my left rotator cuff and tricep. As I pushed—shoved, the careless, impulsive movements of angrily tossing sheets only made my fit nothing more than an effort in chiseling away at myself.

Another attempt, another day or so, or hours, I don't know, but another repeating of this discomfort, poured into the metastasizing worry—another attempt at this mystery.

I sat there, wondering if I should get up. Was there anything really needing my attention, or should I drift back into a miasma, a proto-sleep, an unsatisfying dreaminess likely to offer nothing new beyond my prior, crushing defeats? It might offer something new, as I hadn't tried this before. Then again, it might only restart—begin again. I debated momentarily. I inhaled deeply, enough to bring pain to my sternum. No, I had “restarted” far too many times to remember.

These negotiations would only continue, so I swiftly slung my legs ninety degrees in a clockwise manner, feet swooping over the edge of the bed, my soggy, cold toes finding the even chillier gray-stone floor, and I rose, taking a moment to deeply inhale at. I'd hoped it would clear



the lingering disorientation, but the acrid fumes punctuated with dead fire greeted me in resounding waves. This must be something new, I thought, something I hadn't before encountered.

Throughout the repetition, I'd learned the sudden-ness of some smells startled to the surface corresponding memories in such a profound cascade from deep-mind that I would go completely blind to what lay in front of me, but in this curious, iterative realm capable of hijacking my visual cortex, I wondered—what constituted their pathways? It was not the smell itself stirring the memory of itself. Memories, or rather, threads, as I've mentioned, solidified from a plethora of things. It seemed more, an array of triggers attached to activity, to patterns. But for what reason? And how? I had not quite been able to locate the mechanism behind which these threads formed. I only knew them as they arrived, and I knew that through repetition they grew stronger.

Before I could speculate further about triggers, another pressuring idea—with the urgency of someone shoving through to the edge of a crowd at a parade, this new idea like a jubilant provocateur—suddenly blurted, “Is this even your own mind, or that of an other?”

“Does the distinction matter?” I argued out loud, back at my childish construction of the thought, back at myself, back at no one.

I thought again of the flecks, of what I'd gathered from the threads so far on this waking, as some details always vanished upon the next round of navigation. Perhaps such disappearances represented my lack, or I should say, an artificial perception of that lack designed to confound me. Nevertheless, unyielding apparitions of forgetting fumigated my mind and all my thoughts responding to its suffocation, its eclipsing parade of silence. A bottomless descent of almost-drowning. The prospect of finding answers—I had learned—fluctuated from dim to motes of

brightness amidst the murk-memory I toiled to recall from one moment to the next. I had awakened again—yes, that much was clear. The smell . . . the smell was back, because it wasn't new. I had awakened and begun again, but there was something else I'd intended to remember this time around.

In my passages from end to beginning, some fragments of my attempts remained, accumulated, formed an aggregate of evidence, the parallel lines of concurrent histories braiding together more tightly than mere threads, but different choices arose and loomed within this ever more intricately becoming matrix, and such density could complicate my chances to form new threads. It could distract. This would lead me to choose differently than I had intended, thus weakening or removing the thread—or so I had thought.

Instead, further discrete details confronted me—presenting themselves as critical pieces of the same puzzle. Threads would be lost, no matter what actions I took, and rather than threads, other actions would form something else, something like a knot—not a thing to repeat, but a structure of constancy, an artifact woven from the disarray of this labyrinth. Hence, other artifacts I have yet to mention.

These distinctions are important to the matter of the “emergence,” for I knew that when it arrived, I would be forced to further partition between a “now” and “after” within the period of my waking, collating, and resetting. The “now” comprised that time when I first woke and began to investigate, and the “after” I related as some kind of explosion, the mass of discombobulating sensory and material activity, gathering, remembering of myself—something that I'll remind you, again, connected, assembled—created pathways, braids, knots, entanglements—the remainders. The emergence I more aptly defined as implosive, a contraction of sorts the result of which not only overturned but erased the histories of my activities preceding it. What I mean to

say is . . . nothing from before remained once the emergence occurred. Details had been erased, and I felt this loss in the form of new voids within my psyche. Threads must have unraveled as well. I wondered—did the knots, also? They couldn't have. I knew it because I had only one knot—the emergence itself.

This anomalous temporality exceeded mere perception, I believed, though its echo featured prominently prior to and during the “emergence.” Imposing a sense of time was only possible in the “before,” I concurred. The exigency of “after” negated all sense of time in its patterning, in its array of information, though spatiality figured prominently, thus its fullness in objects, in activity.

I wondered what all I'd forgotten but then my reviewing halted as the foul odor returned—and was it coming from something routine and effortless, like neglecting to take the garbage out, or some food thing I'd dropped and left for whatever I imagined would take care of it, thus eliminating any need for my attention—but then I knew that I hadn't been eating either, as I was famished, but perhaps this posed another condition of the emergence, a sign of its imminence. These possibilities I couldn't entertain beyond brief whims. None of these things held the credibility of threads.

I hadn't always been like this, I thought, so prone to simultaneous carelessness and irrationality about all things encircling and rising from within myself, but then again, I hadn't always been so assailed and infiltrated with various illnesses until recently, and then imprisoned within this relentless machine.

Or perhaps I had been. Perhaps I hadn't let myself see it.

I grew up in a fairly rural town, close to the borders of three state lines: my own, a northern, and a westward, their boundaries drawn by the convergence of two rivers. Wedges of

land, separated by muddy water. An illusion, I thought, on my most recent trip back to that place, myself quite capable of understanding now that the perception of division proved muddier than the rivers, brimming with all manner of silt, organic detritus, dissolving embankments, decomposing flora and fauna, yet even so, flowered with fruiting bodies and bacteria, decomposing, an array of burgeoning, diminutive but not inconsequential organics, to greater arrangements of multicellular organisms the layperson more easily recognized as bass, catfish, or gar—a thriving and reproducing, something wholly contained only insofar as millennia of evolution and ecological parity deemed possible for the brief moment of human seeing that collapsed such teeming movement to stillness, to a presumption of fixity.

I had always believed myself an unhappy child, but not sickly. We played outside in the dirt, a thought that inspires immediate chagrin by the urgent need to make it an addition to the verbal framing of my history. Responding to common pleasantries when meeting a new person has always been, for me, preceded by an internal wince and unspooling. I've never been good at sharing, but more importantly, I have one of those faces that doesn't feign interest in even the slightest. Imagine how silly you would look, attempting to untangle a fist-sized ball of fishing line.

On Saturdays we sometimes rode our bikes to the river, the hills growing steeper and falling more quickly on that asphalt that stayed unmarked with lanes until even now, I imagine, the earth packed with tight rolling hills the closer we came to an eventual final descent, a bluff. I feel the rush of wind anytime I visit this memory, and the hot stench of the mud that cakes far inland—deeply entombing the sandy banks, skeletal, etched ends of blanched driftwood protruding from the muck, its brown, cracked tiles still bearing a sheen not unlike pudding, beetle-lines drawn amidst bird-prints, and the caverned depressions of deer hooves.

It wasn't the outside, that great openness and lack of containment that troubled me as I traveled back, recalling my many bike wrecks, scrapes, splinters, cuts, or sheer abandonment by my older brother, he having been angered that our mother had forced him to take me along. None of that particular solitude lacked a certain fullness to it—in fact, it proved evidence of the heightening dread I felt with this latest recall. Something blurted out to me, a thread, perhaps a knot, the voice insisting, “Remember these walls.”

A new memory, a new thread—from during my travels the summer before—the house. Something about where I grew up. Not what lay within it, not the experiences enswirling its mass. The house itself.

Behind the drywall and off-white paint, I searched, and what I'd once feared now came to with invitation: the groans, the aches, and the yelling amassed behind the walls, etched into the frame, the woodwork, the foundation, the deteriorating layers of shingles, the winding grain of each board, and touching it, pressing my ear to it, beneath the seething years, I heard, and thus understood more beyond its place in my mind, more beyond its resilience in the object—the ease in which it coursed, pulsed, made passage through my ears and fingers.

Fleeing the vision for a moment, I noticed something as I stretched my neck, my body having struggled through popping knees, stiff thighs, hips, and an enflamed left shoulder when rising from the soaked mattress. Thick, jagged lines spread across the adjacent wall from some parting crack, as though someone had attempted to draw an electric tree trunk with rich onyx pastel or charcoal, but they hadn't quite understood the materials they worked with, how such drawing tools would fail to make satisfactory marks. Even so, they had attempted twice more, but they must have tried to rinse it all away, for the outer edges of the trunk grew increasingly transparent, seemed to pour downward into misshapen, washed roots that spilled like

entanglements of bleeding, squirreled cords. The artist's aims of undoing had also failed, and I wondered if I'd already known about this blight, but had, in my confused state, just been overlooking it for some time.

No, I knew this thread, and something else had caught my attention—the orange specks in the black trunk of the tree, near its center, the brightness of the spots somehow adding depth to the drawing, a splitting rift I might plunge into, but I didn't. I observed, fixed on that curious light glimmering within—those flecks. I needed to remind myself of something, what I'd tried to remember from my last passage through this queer machine of time, object, memory, and scar tissue.

The flecks twinkled.

With resonance. With intent.

During my travels back to the place where I'd spent most of my childhood, I'd gone into my mother's room to rummage through old photo albums, and there I saw evidence of things I'd either forgotten, or things that over the years I'd convinced myself had somehow been fabricated. Too many smiles. Not in programmatic response either, as we all grow accustomed to that automation. Whenever someone's demands to immortalize a moment summons our trained reflex, we typically smile on instinct. I was never good at this—my face isn't made for pretending, but these photos didn't merely evince the dishonesty I am incapable of in such moments.

An artificiality emerged from that sampling of my many faces I couldn't believe, the teeth bared, grin stretched too wide, eyes blaring, animalistic, an excitement neither gleeful nor indicative of childly mischief and unpredictability. Something . . . instilled, something subversively entrained through violent proceedings.

As I flipped through the sleeves of photographs, my dissociative state grew more pronounced. I paused on one image of myself, my father, and my older brother dressed in thick camouflaged hunting gear and orange sock hats, faces blushed from the chilled dawn air. I must have been eight or nine, my older brother thirteen. We surrounded the hanging carcass of a field-dressed doe, its gaping, red-soaked underbelly hollowed out from the anus to the neck, white ribs and fascia bright against bluish, blackening sinew and yellowed hunks of fat. My father stood on the right, lips spread over his similarly yellowed teeth, cheeks and jowls swollen, choking his own face, my brother crouching, mouth and eyes stretched with too much of the same, unsettling inner light, some turbulent, deep frenzy. His 12-gauge barrel pointed upward—it was his kill, I remember.

I was the only one not looking at the camera, my face and hand an angular blur as though my eyes had instead been trained on the animal's fur, my palm outstretched and touching it, but I must have suddenly jerked to the side toward the camera, the flesh smudge and dark bands for my eyes and mouth surging, rendering discernment of any expression impossible. Ripping, gaping. I looked back to the carcass, suddenly remembering the way our dogs would so immediately dispose of their calm demeanor and traipse voraciously around and between my father's feet after he'd strung up the slain animal before making that first slice, the dogs' mouths unable to contain their bulging, wobbling tongues, weeping saliva dappling army-green boots.

My father would show us each organ, first poking at the soft, pillowy entrails after they'd fallen with the tip of his knife. He'd single out each one before moving deeper into the animal's body, down into its thoracic cavity for the remains of the liver, lungs, and heart, occasionally scolding the dogs, the mutts strangling themselves in their collars against the grip of my brother and I, who could barely restrain them. When finally released, they hungrily devoured, their heads

plunging, jaws snapping with froth and foam, teeth bared and chomping only when a piece couldn't be swallowed whole. I remembered the dogs in their state later that afternoon—on their sides in the dead grass, overfed and wheezing.

In the photograph, the soft light of an almost neon fleck pierced the inner walls of the deer's gaping chest cavity, the furious particle suspended midair, reminding me that they had infiltrated what constituted my permanent memory in this place. I saw them in artifacts when I recalled, often searching for some correlation, and this brought me uncharacteristic confidence over the matter of solving the labyrinth, despite my attempts to convince myself with small intrusive thoughts that the fleck in the photo had simply been the result of a mote of dust on the camera lens, light refracted and set ablaze—but that didn't explain the wall, which drew me closer, and to my shock I learned that what I'd earlier conceived of as a series of failed illustrations of trees now presented itself as tangible, jagged splits in the wall.

The quickened pace of my heart almost yanked me to the floor, and kneeling, I let my fingers glide over one edge of the depression to the right-hand side, where the washed-out scrawl changed to more transparent, soot-like smears and stains. I noticed a coldness to the drywall, a dampness as I risked closer examination, residue coating my fingertips like oil paint stowed away for far too long, its consistency viscous and gummy between my thumb and forefinger as I pressed and swirled, the substance not unlike a thickening, charcoal masque one might apply to their face, and after its congealing, peel away like dead skin. I attempted to rub the gunk onto a clean spot of wall, regretting it almost immediately for having spread the mess, but then I wondered how one might go about cleaning this up anyway, and besides, I had only just begun my investigation. Far more likely, I considered, this cleaning would contribute further havoc to



an already complex system, and I didn't want to inadvertently undermine myself in this waste of time and potential erasure of threads.

Something caught my attention about the substance nearer the largest of the “cracks,” or more deliberately, the “openings,” that I hadn't noticed before: it was moving. Not like some growth or parasite, but certainly, I saw a shift like light on water, but much more diminutive, split into curling, winding loops and impossible entanglements, as you would imagine heaps of yarn spun to utter chaos.

The cracks spanned a greater breadth than perhaps the word inspires, wide enough for me to even slip a finger inside, and I couldn't resist attempting the action almost immediately as I had imagined the possibility of it. Never one susceptible to the tropes of horror films, the moment brought no suspense or culturally ingrained anxiety about my hand or wrist being snatched by some force or creature that would tug to elbow's depth my arm into a gaping, fang-lined maw or decapitating portal-of-no-return. No, what I felt inspired feelings of a lurid, displaced expectation, something nonlocalized and indiscernible, something beyond my known grammar of excitations.

Heaviness overcame me, matured as my digits pressed into the space, the presumed rigidness of sharp, fractured drywall not meeting my touch, but instead, a difficult jellyness identical to that lining the edge of the crack, though thicker, and I detected some other distinct texture that had been absent before, something prickling—not like needles or the quills of a cactus, but almost crunchy, like pressing into frost, and with it, the sensation in my fingers of blood being constrained, the oxygen it carried withheld and my tissues crying out for breath.

Withdrawing, I observed that my fingers now adorned the pitch and its arabesque contortions of threaded light, the luminescent bands winding in and out of themselves in the

coating sludge, its cords dangling, not quite dripping, but forever threatening to do so should I continue lingering there, gawking at the substance I could no longer deny possessed metaphysical properties. I smushed it around as I had before, attempting to decipher the bands of light, though I knew this futile.

One of the orange flecks caught in the edge of my thumbnail, like a grain of sand or grit you'd instinctively excavate and flick aside. I rose and stepped to the bathroom attached to my bedroom, retrieving a pair of tweezers quickly from the vanity's drawer, metal and plastic contents jangling about when I yanked the brass knob. The fleck separated cleanly from the syrupy, brightness-riddled substance when I plucked at it, although it required greater effort than I had imagined, the goo stretching into a shiny, bulbous peak like some magnetized ferrofluid, its light spinning, coiling as I persisted against its apparent, agitation? No, resistance, I concurred, the muck blobbing back to the form it had assumed over my skin when the fleck at last pried free, and I let the orange particle drop into an empty glass jar near the hideous, cream-colored vanity for god knows what reason.

After smothering the mess on my fingers with tissue and discarding it in the waste basket, I ventured a closer look at the fleck. It didn't move, didn't shine even, appeared no more remarkable than any common dot of ink, save for its unusual opacity—intensities of orange-ness that my rolodex of “orange things” couldn't provide a sample for comparison with, not even one of those genetically augmented tangerines or “cuties” that the health nut at work is always shoving in your face—its flesh chemically altered, radioactive, somewhere deep within the most brilliant impossible orange you couldn't have imagined until seeing it. The fleck, I found, lay somewhere beyond that. Not orange, not red, and not in between. Somewhere outside of that line I attempted to draw, its hue connoting a fulminating, alien decree that nearly instilled an

imperiled state for my having gazed far too longingly and studiously, as though I looked upon some sacrosanct, unknowable remnant of a larger order, thus committing heresy. My vision darkened at the edges as I attempted to get closer and apply more scrutiny. I could very easily see . . . it changed.

This transition involved neither light or shape, but position. The fleck wobbled for some prolonged moment, and then it stopped, and then it went again. The thread struck in my mind like a bell, but I recalled that in order to see the fleck's discreet movements and time them properly, a notion that sparked my interest, I'd need a few tools from my studio to conduct a proper examination.

Leaving the dot imprisoned in the glass jar, I worked my way to the adjacent room between the bedroom and living room, the latter of the two attached to an open-concept kitchen that at one point seemed novel and thrilling to me, myself having fantasized of someday being capable of hosting guests on the regular.

The spare bedroom I used for my studio, and upon entering I simultaneously winced and sighed in relief at the familiarity of the havoc. An oak easel, situated in the west corner, held a half-finished painting that from this distance appeared no different to me than the mad, uncalculated whims of a five-year-old with an overabundance of paints and brushes, while the rest of the room and its accumulations of various tools, oils, thinners, palettes, cans and red solo cups half-filled with brushes and drying, muddied thinner, stain-worn cleaning rags, and leaning stacks of failed, thus discarded canvases, resembled what I would, in my own defense, characterize as an order of sorts, a series of processes-in-waiting, though for a return I had not visualized beyond fantasy. Yet these things drew me to them in a curious way, in their dilapidated state of evaporated aims, incompleteness that conflicted with mental assurances of

eventually getting back to that grind once this mystery of the flecks and walls had been solved, and thus prevented another cycle of the “emergence,” though such optimism quickly distilled to cynicism, and cynicism thickened to contempt for my own foolish leanings towards the dead and the rot, the sweet perfume of terpenoid, dried, decaying paints and still-life flowers that withered to unidentifiable detritus, vapors of harsher solvents I’d abandoned, their tin cans mistakenly left uncapped, perhaps emptied, perhaps not and simply exuding residue, but I found myself unwilling to check, more mindful of my elbows and gait as I tiptoed along, fearing that any sudden movement would send materials, liquid, and dust raining to the pile. Yet, as everything remained as I had left it, the room connoted a feeling of things being as they should, or I should say, as they had been planned upon the latest reset. I couldn’t deny neither the comfort nor the inwardly reflected order nestled within my own tense, unyielding desire to see something change there. But then I realized my attraction courted only with potential, with proposition and promise of “later,” something that wouldn’t survive another beginning-again, another reset, so I drank the feelings in, appreciated the room, distanced myself from the urgencies the room sought to terrorize me with.

It had been another unrealized endeavor of mine—to move the studio to the front den with the wooden floors and picture window. That had always seemed like a better place to get things done, a better place to investigate, to ponder, to stare into some untraceable place beyond the window and wonder as I worked.

It must have been weeks now since I last sat and made one stroke of any color, the balding, confetti-spackled face of the empty stool I’d kept from my graduate school studies glaring back at me like some hostile pet greeting its owner’s return from a long day of work with scowls of contempt for the undeserving and outrageous neglect.

I took a deep breath and exhaled, attempting to dissuade the emotions of these unmaterialized projects and suspended ideas. In my erratic search throughout the room for a magnifying glass, I had glanced over a paint tray of dried plaster, a white-cruled spatula, the empty paper bag still coated with dried splatters and finer powder, and beside this, drywall screens that were either mangled or missing cutouts of different sizes. I must have meant to do some patchwork—or perhaps I had already, my mind sounded, but after kneeling to examine this unique mess further, nothing more revealed itself to me.

Part of my thoughts dwelled on the disappointment of not having located a magnifying glass, which of course then extended mental feelers to other possible locations in the house, but another portion of my brain fashioned new ideas from the mess of plaster and cut, metallic screens. I decided to go back and examine the wall and its crack, abandoning my quest for something to more adequately study the glowing, wobbling fleck. A magnifying glass wouldn't be sufficient, I'd decided. I needed a microscope—something I had owned at one point in my life, when I was a child and I'd convinced my mother to buy me one of those basic kits from the local crafts store, but who knows where that thing had gone, along with many of my other possessions from those years.

Did I miss those things like that? Things I'd left behind? I used to cherish pouring over my own juvenile ephemera—various drawings, sketches, and stories bound up in folders of exploding, kaleidoscopic color I kept stowed away under my bed like some secret treasure. I didn't keep things anymore, at least not like that, not in a sort of manner that suggested a tucked-away sanctuary of locked time and sacred artifacts, rites of creative birthing, passage, of nascent, unfettered production before the inevitable onslaught of criticism from others. The studio sufficed as the greatest evidence of having departed from those needs, primarily its disarray, but

something eluded me, had been taunting me for some time, something in the process of making itself.

In my examinations of my own work, I concluded I had become destination-obsessed, solidifying through my own visionary thinking something too concrete in the array of potential. Object-ness and category superseded generative processes, my typical, flailing but carefree approach slowing to calculated caution founded on a desperation to apprehend the imagined targets.

I knew well enough that product rarely encapsulated vision to its fullest extent—at least for myself. I have often wondered if that is the case for everyone, as I have always struggled to make something as I see it in my mind, or have dreamed and dwelled upon it, and from an early age, used to find those who had no trouble with this, as well as representationalism, as people whom I should pursue and learn from.

When I first entered college, I enrolled in a fine arts degree, my concentration in drawing, of course, and I immediately gravitated towards those other students who could serve as such sources for learning, or rather, mimicry, being that I intended to learn their secrets. One student in particular, Leah, I found to be obnoxiously modest with her capabilities.

“I just see something, or I remember something, and I know what it’s supposed to look like,” she would say, when I, with mouth agape, would marvel and beckon to know how she had crafted something so intricately photorealistic, whether it be an insect, a bird, a cartoon character, the still-life in front of us, or a scenic spread of some wilderness location I had never seen before.

“I know where every line goes. I know how every piece looks, and I know how to make the materials do what I want.”

This created some tension between she and I, though Leah's reticence to share any techniques became less pronounced when I discovered that she possessed a photographic memory and had, in truth, never experienced the need to study her subject—at least, not to the degree I myself or most others have to. I noticed, then, a kind of emptiness in her work. Her drawings were too accurate, too cold and methodical, the product of reflex, not of intent or vision. They might as well have been photographs, but not even those which should be considered to preclude any motivations beyond perhaps a compulsion to catalogue, to collect. Even our instructor expressed some disdain over the self-evident fixity and unsettling cleanliness of Leah's work, saying once during a critique of her picturesque, blue-sky rendering of a female, bright-eyed and blonde-haired jockey saddling a mare atop a grassy knoll, "This is a very *neat* drawing, Leah, but what are we supposed to talk about here?"

This thread wasn't about questions regarding the work of art and prodigy without direction. I had been thinking about my own collections, or those I had considered failures, and not only the items comprising terrific varieties of material chaos in my home, but of those I had left elsewhere, had given away, or perhaps even those I'd forgotten about. These were all remnants of a sort, I figured—pieces that I had abandoned, yet signifiers that I could never again take hold of or ascertain the thread's specific meaning. I knew it lay somewhere between the general relations between artifact and process, likely in an egoic context, like all other things in this maze—but how could I reclaim what I knew was missing . . . something I'd forgotten?

When I returned to the bedroom, the crack in the wall had widened to a gap. Ten paces away, I noticed discolorations, places where someone had not so skillfully coated over the off-white paint with brighter, smoother sweeps of plaster. Impossible as it seemed, no one else could have done this but me. Flecks glinted around the fissure, abundant and clustered, drifting away

from the unzipped seam like drunken fireflies. I now believed its globulus inner sea must be washing through the walls like blood from unsutured wounds, in flows towards various other reaches—openings I would have otherwise assumed to be nonexistent. The flecks originated from within the ooze, perhaps something I suspected before, but now confirmed, the bands of miniscule light within the substance wrapping more tightly before delicately snapping, this rebounding inertia lifting small beads of goo away, spheres which then compressed, crystallized, and lit up quick like an ember catching air. I felt a calmness in the languid drift of the flecks, and despite their emanation harboring far more purpose than mere dust caught in a sunbeam, I recognized them as a new thread, the memory transforming the particles beyond something other than remnants of a structure, soul-fragments fleeing the ossuary of fractured, disintegrating wall—something I hadn't seen yet.

Then the wall spoke.

Once again distracted by minutiae, a broader, more pronounced thought arrived concerning the spread of plaster—it didn't seem to be half a bag's worth. I knew this from having worked with the material in ceramics courses during my unfinished art degree. The prudent nature of further investigation—as I've come to expect of myself—dismissed the notion of having discarded the excess elsewhere, and the image of myself scraping spoiled cottage cheese down the kitchen sink intruded, along with reminders of my conflicting intolerance for handling fruit peels when needing to dispose of them, the swirling pests they attracted if left in the garbage bin for too long. I thought I should check to see if it needed to be taken out, but I didn't want to wander into the kitchen. But if I did, then I would be able to see if I had in fact disposed of the plaster there. I should inspect it anyhow, I considered, as I had not yet investigated every room in the house to determine whether the odor of flourishing bacterial water



had infiltrated those spaces as well. I considered it must have, for the acrid fume seemed even to leech from my own clothing, mingling with days of sweat and moisture freshly perspiring my neck, but I worried that I had perhaps been desensitized by now, or that the smell had become something more intricate than a thread, less observable, but no less discordant in nature than a knot born from that subtlety of mind, that absurd complexity from which I'd been attempting to impose my will and solve this tenacious game. My senses had been dulled from days of lethargy, but the potent stench could very well be something I'd fixed into the apparatus—a clue. But where would it lead? And then the thought occurred to me: where might it *not* lead?

The exit from my home's rear entryway consisted of a dilapidated screen door whose rusted hinges and springs croaked as I turned the handle and pushed—and this time proved no different than before, nor the rattling protest of its plexiglass as I allowed it to slip from my grasp and clang against the doorframe. I didn't mind, rather enjoyed the sound of leaving, although instead of being greeted with the cool, cleansing afternoon breeze that would have released me from the ripening odors of my home, a far more putrid stench like a humid, brackish pool reeled my senses, as though I'd waded ankle-deep into standing water that brimmed with mosquitoes birthed from a festering perfume exhaled by slithering, fibrous muck, a choking brine.

Ah, yes, the garbage, I remembered, but instead of turning around to retrieve it, a perimeter wall, rectangular in shape, stole my attention for long enough of a moment to encourage an inspection. Its surface appeared much like rough pumice, or even serrated, dead coral exhumed from a bleached reef, the sharp edges girding the pockmarks smashed together in irregular configurations sure to trigger anyone's tropophobia. I pressed the index and middle fingers of my right hand into one of the depressions, drawing it back when I sensed something slightly squishy and very moist, something of a consistency far different than what slithered

behind the walls in my home. A dark green substance not too different than bile coated the tips of my fingers, and I ventured a smell, the peat-like aroma of souring decay prompting me to scrape away the filth on a thick cluster of verdant shoots sprouting near the wall's base. I peered into the sky, its overcast pall bearing a piercing intensity of sun cast through thick haze, inducing with its sickly luminosity a burning drowsiness behind my eyes. The light seeped deeper, through the flesh of my cheeks and seemingly, the back of my throat. My shoulders slumped, and I felt myself drifting; the bed called to me, its soothing, prickling warmth and the calming, safeguarding heaviness of its two blankets, a large red, white, and black knitted afghan, and finally, a maroon and gold-striped comforter, all echoing through my limbs as though I were buried beneath them. Still crouching, I could have just as easily slumped to my side and fallen under, but as my shoulder and hand pressed back into the wall, I was startled from the spell, alert, and clamored to my feet with some unusual kind of haste to something inside.

Another thread, I noted. Another artifact of repetition, this urgency.

\* \* \* \*

The bridge between the future and past are not as resolute as I would have conceived. Granted, were I to freely undergo this task of construction, I can't be anymore confident now that I would possess evidence otherwise. With suspended-mind, cognizant, unleashed in pocketed, incremental time and space, who knows. Nevertheless, an immediate, second discovery emerged from the existence of these tenuous, paradoxical passages—between any perceived, fixed locales, the path remained just as flimsy as the irreconcilable, virulent uncertainties of accurately recollecting that past, and as you might imagine, such frailty signaled the inherent unpredictability of the most meticulously well-laid plans.

Yet I found myself far less surprised by this relationship than you might imagine, and . . . far more disappointed by the daunting parameters of the challenge—I have never been opposed to or easily distraught by incessant repetition, although I admit this project of boring new tunnels through the matrix of my own turbulent history and desired future, the effort being, to reclaim that history and its constituent parts, seemed rather challenging.

I had been allowing the flecks to guide me for some time. Though unlike those sometimes generous, but mostly petulant fireflies, I considered that this task might offer no assistance of any kind. This wasn't an investigation—there was no remedial structure beyond knots should I fail at any stage of the process—and that represented only a hypothesis within a process I couldn't even begin to comprehend. I'm uncertain of whether I do now.

In this strange plane, this realm, whatever the nature of its myriad coalescing, comingling dimensionality—here there existed only a sense of mathematical fantasy—or hysteria. But I considered it also kept in some greater reserve an immense measure of possibility—pure, undecided, unallocated storage for any kind of information, no matter how complex, and I had brought something else there inadvertently, something beyond my will, my plans: copious, loud little panics and entrained, history-spanning fears that boiled up from the depths of their own abyssal plane, the Memory-Sea itself, those jigsaw pieces swirling, entangled, billowing on occasion in piles as though colossal stirring arms the size of river barges plowed beneath the mercurial surface. Could the water be reclaimed, here? Could this obsidian-pieced repository of broken, turmoiled mind be made whole? Perhaps that wasn't the point. After exiting the holding-room serving as the conduit between my bedroom and the gray sands shoring that vista of tumbling, puzzled waves, I meditated on a thought: only seeing that sea was what I needed, but that was all I should have done.

“See without eyes,” I reminded myself.

The puzzle piece I had taken was only part of the riddle, figuratively. And, I suppose, *figuratively*, a wholeness in the riddle. That it symbolized a completion of sorts, rather than an emptiness, hadn’t been apparent to me before entering this new, greater void consisting of possibility, an element awaiting the will of a consciousness. No, nothing had been more literal, more full, until now. And yet, I remained rapt in conflicting entanglements of what I had seen, in thoughts of how impossible it felt to hold the heaviness of so many fragments, to withstand the gravity pursuant to the act of merely looking.

That sea, and its many pieces known without explanation, felt without senses, had traveled with me, here. Had I made a mistake?

In this new void-of-all things, in this stratagem of time and space where it appeared as though one’s will and focused prowess to craft alternative realities constituted a prime currency, why should such history as the incomprehensible heaviness of my pain follow? Was there success to achieve over what had transpired? More frankly, what *was* my Past, now that it had shown itself here? What had it been stripped of? Was there a new value to be determined? Where was hope . . . joy? Thoughts such as these assailed my cognition to the point where I felt the tug of some inward inertia, a collapse towards a deep uncanny where beyond the stripping of meaning from words, words exploded, rebounded as projectiles imbued with other imperceptible masses—meanings unknowable to me, instilled via some clandestine, recombinant process I wasn’t privy to in my own, egoic language. Only a grammar accrued via experiences with mind-altering substances—synesthesia to be precise—allowed for some discreet access to this cascade of indecipherable activity, which itself belied some mechanistic presence beneath the surface of the unknown I had plunged into.

We communicate rarely with one another about these moments—these happenings where we, at our most vulnerable, our most desperate, have surrendered to the inevitability of sinking beneath the rippling surfaces of ourselves, of the moments when we drown in collapse, the veneer of our psyche shattered like an ice sheet across the bleak mirror of our own preformed, undomesticated mind that swells—erupts raw from submerged hidden hollows, a kind of voracious mouth.

I had descended, passed, or perhaps more distinctly, yet no less precise, become *integument* to some frothing substrate more vast than my own cavernous abyss where the Puzzle Sea lay, this greater void some constitutive bedrock where structures defying semiotic acquisition flurried like infinitely transmogrifying information, bled from unknown source-points and collided, condensed, then rapidly dissembled into new, sinuous configurations that possessed assimilated and transformed remnants of their prior forms. I detected layers and layers of what I can only describe as emotive-geometric pre-cognates blossoming and billowing upon one another like radioactive ink in water, the suspended clouds flattening, expanding, unfurling, and collapsing into one another, the hyper-infused braids electric, glass-like, diaphanous with fire and roiling steam, bursting into neon flares and ribbons and hyper-structured panes—particles becoming shapes, webs, and weaves both solid and textured like rocky gears that shattered in airs, in smokes, in shards of feathering, prism-refracted bands of light, the watery element serving as womb to this activity bearing no clear property of separation from the dizzying universes of intricacy it birthed. The transparent, suspending element was somehow as integrative as it was distortive, and I sensed that it nourished a denser, more complicated but crucially fundamental function of cyclicity to this evolution of the information, this billowing resistance to consistent form and definition.

And then, without warning, words like cool water quenched my desperation with the cacophony of impossible light, shape, and perpetual transition.

There assembled a thought: this is the machinery of Possibility's Void.

## CHAPTER IV: PERMUTATION—METALOGUE DELTA

### C.3.7

We all have terrains that frighten us. I am sharing mine. Terrains where I feel most vulnerable. I am supposed to be rescuing the inner child, so that makes these terrains imbued with a fundamental kind of anger, however humor is also important to me, and disruptive—you know I've just come to accept that that is part of my job here on Earth, to embrace being Uranian and fearless. To write things that can lead gently by the hand to a place that bears water, but it's also gonna be a writing that fucks hard. I don't need to know all of it. I believe I am in a place where the futility of understanding is something I am comfortable with.

### C.3.8

I do want the work to be understood and accessible. I worry about the work not meeting this expectation.

### C.3.9

The work scares the shit out of me. The matters of illness and my own trans-ness are the whoppers out of it all because those things I haven't written about before, and I've been over and over this again and again, the circumstance of speaking something into being.

### C.4.1

The work feels too challenging and therefore remains unfinished. Too many of my projects remain unfinished, it is true. Attempts! Yes! That is what I will celebrate. I went *there*, to something horrible and wickedly stirring of my trauma, and I survived, so I celebrate that. I cried

and screamed into a pillow (the coral complex has poor sound proofing, and I didn't want to alarm my neighbors). It was a wonderful explosion of emotion that lasted a couple minutes, and I considered myself healed for a moment. A year ago, such occurrences may have lasted several days. That was healing too, wasn't it? It must have been, even though I have no record of it, for I am making things still. So the poem I was most recently left with and even this process entry here have opened up some new doors.

I've paused to jot down some lines on sticky notes. I plan to write some more—and hopefully another poem—after finishing here.

I'm not satisfied. No, far from it. But I think that is an ongoing and ever-present matter w/r/t my own work. I have quite a few poems titled "Letter to..." I don't want anyone to read these letters. Well, perhaps a handful. It's a matter of attempting to find the right ones. I tend to narrativize in these poems, such as, *it is you—you are responsible for this horribleness!* I wonder about access to some of these poems, but I also don't worry about that, because I tend to overthink things quite a lot in my imagining of the ways people interface with texts. *That is not me!* I say, but they don't listen! I am not a commodity, I tell you, but I have irrevocably become one, because look, there! That is something I've made, and set free, and now it is everywhere, and I know this by the evidence of a poem of mine that someone used as a napkin. It was the local café I had visited, you see, for I'd wanted a piece of lemon-lavender cake—white pillowy sponge and blue-ribbon icing—and there it was, one of my *Letter to* poems, bound to the table by the dark, moistening glue of a teacup's wet bottom!



#### C.4.1.4

I know that everyone is bringing different experiences and expertise from many disciplines into the space where this discourse of making happens, so beyond my intent there can be a lot of illuminating surprise. I like to think myself modest, and open-minded, but not dull, not one to be diagnosed with afflicting bovine complacency, a bumbling ass who would let their brain fall out for everyone to see.

#### C.4.1.5

Having departed from a meeting with others, I have concerns about the work I will be revising.

#### C.5

I think with these “Letters to” poems comes an urgency to do a lot more of them. Have I become fixated? I do not know. Some of them are quite brief to evoke a transactional nature, but I think of them sometimes like a swarm relentlessly assaulting me. I’ve disturbed an epistolary hive. If they were to wind up in a book—well, I am thinking about getting them all together in some kind of way. Something that will be called a *work*. I know, yes, this is yet *another* project, but I cannot for the life of me avoid new projects, nor the collective strangle of these confounding letters. They are an untenable mirror. I am my own letters!—my god, it has just hit me—and these extraneous letters of flecks bear some semblance to one another in that regard. No, I am sorry, but I must go and deal with this at once!

### **C.7.3.50**

I will just *not* understand, in totality, what it is I am doing with a given project. It may sound as though I'm repeating myself. What I mean is, my lack of full comprehension does not mean I cannot speak for my work. But to the manner in which I play around with a lot of this traumatic stuff . . . I'm still quite frightened of myself, and what the flecks seem to be leading me towards—which projects I seem most keen to pursue towards a greater completion than others. I want to share a few of my other poems that are more deliberate and concrete in their happenings, because of these connections I see. Moments where the flecks have given, in a way, something more conspicuous than their typical object-correlative dalliance. Yes, I feel I have a strong understanding and familiarity with the work that I've already done, on particular poems, that is, and that puts me in a place of recognizing what it can look like—the end-product of a given project—and therefore grant me some additional push against my collapsing will to move forward.

### **C.7.7.7**

I am content with prose poems, but I am thinking about how they should fit with the rest. There's my brain picking away at structure again. I think the prose poem will show up quite a lot in the work I do in the future. It fits well, or at least I hope it will continue to fit well with my personality, because I need order for the managing of my chaos. Excuse me—that is my current idea of my personality. I know that is not what I am, but I like the idea—that my idea of myself is the right one. I am managing chaos. Bringing order to it. We all need to think things like this to get by, right?

### **C.7.9**

I have a lot more writing to do, of course, but the way it is taking shape right now is thrilling to me. No, that's not what I want to talk about right now. Stop asking me about my writing. Stop asking me about how my projects are going. Don't ask. Yes, that's what you should do. Just be a quiet little muffin. I am going to eat you, little muffin. Crunch every last one of your stupid poppy seeds between my teeth, and then I will swallow, savoring the aftertaste of your screams on my elated exhale.

### **C.8.8**

I am doing my best not to have or acquire a bias about my work that originates from other people, but that is quite difficult to manage when so many of their thoughts masquerade as my own.

#### **C.8.8.1**

I woke from a nap, and seeking to sate my appetite for cake, slipped into a gown and wandered from the coral castle down the street to the café. They did not have lemon-lavender, only carrot cake with raisins and sweet butter-cream icing. I sat quietly eating the cake one nimble bite at a time, sipping a hot chai tea while the mist of the morning heaved against the glass, its pale light a fever in the eyes. Churned up by some wind from a nearby sea, that ignominious white must have been, for I knew that smell of salt and sand and sticky brine, but I had not seen it, and after a few moments more, nor could I see through it.

### C.9.3

I think I don't necessarily like shorter poems, but I sometimes write them, too. Especially if it is one of those late-night intrusions that needs to be put down somewhere. I wrote a poem in a scream the other night, waking in sweats. It was a dream, you see. And this is so odd, my telling you this, for I have never awakened from a dream in such a dramatic manner. That is only for the movies—waking with a scream.

But I had dreamed I was hanging the last of my laundry, though fighting with vines sprouting from the earth seeking to drag my bedsheets down from the lines, and the wind not helping, I gave up, letting those gnarled roots have my canary sheets, watching them tear free as a wind scraping aged post-it notes from a wall. I used them for such interruptions—the post-it notes. Aphorisms, no yellow. Fuchsia and electric blue. I do like the idea of it, though, my walls covered in yellow sticky notes.

I don't know how/where they fit in the context of a larger work that is supposed to have a rigid form/assembly in order to be considered the thing that it is (a long poem, in this example). But I don't necessarily want/need to break that form so much, either, even if I am interested/compelled in exploring/discovering other/many ways/methods of/about comp/os(t)/ing, and there is the matter of the disparate, intrusive thoughts about organization and form in relation to my process—the work that I'm doing. The work I *want* to be doing. The work that I *must* do. Not only to survive, but to someday thrive.

#### C.9.4

I feel I am in a better place with the prose poems. Reading aloud the poem “Trigger” turned out to be less triggering than I anticipated. I had a small audience, of which I am happy to report no one was hospitalized for hysterics or anaphylactic shock, but to others it *was* more triggering than I thought it would be, as Kara, being in attendance, and so overcome by the dramatic release of the poem’s crescendo, spilled from her seat into a wailing, frothing mess on the floor. I continued reading the final stanza as others attended to her, ignoring the audible cries that rang out over the frantic shouts of unaffected audience members who attempted to stifle her hooting and to no avail, restrain her from spinning round and round with bicycling legs.

During refreshments after the reading, I shared a private laugh with Mary about the incident, the dreadful state of Mary’s tattered pantyhose, but my newfound friend was clearly still shaken herself, bosom and cheeks flushed with primrose anguish as she forced a chuckle through a strained half smile and touched her hair, casting her poor deer eyes off to the side.

The anxieties I have about the prose poems I would say orbit some concerns I have about calling trauma forth—that is an important part of doing this kind of work that should be talked about—how it can overwhelm you in different ways. I am not sure it is universal, and I am not so concerned about others. I myself do not always have control of the valve, so writing in a way can have its own siren call to more things in the unconscious, or memories stored you had forgotten about. How could I possibly take responsibility for what my work stirs in others, given that? Work is a mirror, and they chose to look and see. I am not responsible for the floods that drown another. I am defiantly opposed to the assertion I am responsible for all my own, in fact. I did not

put these things in my head. I did not choose to have these abyssal realms, yet here they are, so if I am responsible, then it is for cleansing them, and if they cannot be cleansed, then I am still their keeper.

### **C.9.5**

Just in quantity, the *grounds* I spoke of before—they possess a kind of quality that interferes and muddles the work you are trying to do. Again, that is my experience.

### **C.9.5.2**

I still struggle with these pieces, considering the grounds they happen out of—arrive from. I am so frustrated, yes, but as I noted, the subject matter is difficult and darker—definitely delving into that territory *terror-tory* of discomfort. I think it's worth mentioning that this past weekend, after having workshopped the poem "Play," one of the subjects in the piece (my cousin) reached out to me through the mail. Or they must have already, in a strange premonitory fashion that I won't attribute to coincidence. This was such a peculiar occurrence, finding their letter, as I haven't spoken to them in maybe five years or more. I honestly don't know how long, because I can't remember the last time I had attended an extended family gathering, and it would have been around Thanksgiving, I believe. I suspect alcohol may have been a component, due to the nature of their writing, which was wholly positive, but somewhat uncomfortable, given the nature of their penmanship, and not to mention their word choices.

## **C.9.6**

I have decided that I don't know what to make of the letter. I'm not the type to write everything off as coincidence, and the dis-ease I experienced in the afterthoughts of what was written to me led to one perhaps inevitable conclusion—I put the letter away out of sight. Stuffed it between a foot-tall stack of thumbnail drawings of still life arrangements that I intend to discard.

### **C.9.7.1**

I have burned the stack of thumbnails, and presumably, the letter from my cousin along with them.

### **C.9.7.2**

I have needed to examine once again the level of suspicion that I carry with me everywhere as a result of my own trauma. It causes me to initially perceive kindness and positivity as danger.

#### **C.9.7.2a**

Trying to figure out ways to manage my own creative energies takes a toll. Although my flow states with poetry arrive much more quickly than they do with my fiction work, if I am working during the day, exhaustion arrives much sooner with poetry than with prose, especially if I am in front of a word processor. Other methods of completing poetry-associated projects have failed, so understandably, my productivity's all over the place. Desire does not seem to matter. The idea of a scheduled rhythm seems humorous at this point. Yet, I refuse to give in to despair, or self-directed gaslighting, as I am prone to resort to, when crossing a certain threshold of disappointment with myself. To alleviate this tenacious energy, you'll be happy to hear that I

scooped up the ashes from the burn pile and after having mixed them with weed killer, applied the charcoal slurry to the canary sheets now thoroughly clenched in the tangles of those pesky vines.

### **C.9.3**

Again, I have traveled beyond the perimeter of the coral domicile to the wood. The crackling cinder of blooming coals under wet drizzle calms my lungs, and though the smolder does not eclipse the acrid fume of the sea on a particularly hot and humid day, I fancy it does.

### **C.9.4**

There's not enough to burn.

### **C.11**

The wood carries a shimmer, flecks leaving a place where cognition becomes phantasmagoric—a plane of non-dialectical materio-historic systema. An immaterial production set forth and subsumed into transcendence, into luminous chaos.

#### **C.11.1**

I have returned from the wood again. I went there for firewood, but finding only the bristling kindling of my fears, built a fire of doubts and agonies I struggled to believe I had imagined for myself.

But I know it is true—that I did imagine them. Endless prisons, and I was not satisfied with them, nor only the idea of my confinement.



Past the lip of the field where bald oaks stripped of their coats—from rot or lightning strike ages ago, I remain unsure—the dark shawl of the wood swallows with strange warmth, a hallucination whose envelope, when pierced finely by delicate, leaf-tussling wind, falls prey to a curious, sepulchered chill.

Something old and rested rises, issuing a yawn, yet in its call I find each time an exuberant defiance.

I carried myself more nimbly than ever, on my last visit, meaning not only to leave no trace, but proceeding as though the forest had fashioned its own floor as beds of fragile glass nettles.

Every step overflows with cautions and worries, and every step bears the promise of nicking wounds.

### **C.11.1a**

I blame a sudden stomach bug for my recent loss of sleep. But even had I gotten enough, I don't believe I would feel rested. The question of whether I am producing enough work ails me. Whether or not it is *good* work. I am unsure of what that mean. *What is good?*

#### **C.11.1a.1**

The forest makes promises it can keep, but its trees advise I will not live long enough to see them come to pass.

*We can clean the air, they said. Cleanse the earth of its plague.*

*Take the woes of the world into our leaves and store them down into the roots; let waters pass through the sieve of our souls.*

“How long?” I asked, clinging to one, a soaring sequoia three-hundred feet tall. “When will it happen?”

*After the fire*, they said.

“Fire? What fire?”

They did not answer, only groaned slowly in the wind, having gone, perhaps, back to sleep.

### **C.11.1b**

the small pond makes the middle of the forest  
a placid pool mossed in spongy algae, turquoise  
dark and darker still near the bottom, empty  
curtained by the dregs of ancient willows  
pale-leafed and lithe on the kindling breeze—  
in my mind, a wind that stirs to flame  
their cold still wait—for the wood promised  
*the fire is coming*, those eldery giants  
carrying its proof in their rungs, an ashen ring  
scarring their years with marks of glistening tar  
from when the world bellowed, opening its throat  
its pains heard, hidden, safeguarded like secrets  
for as long as they might stand

I lay cheek and belly down on the world

my ear ready for its heart, the soothing thrum  
of earthly coil, the emptying out of lungs  
in one single sigh—relief, or pause—  
a tear, a calm space between thrashing limbs  
around me, the mourn and worry of the gray  
the sky and cleaving rifts far below, their rising rumble  
and doppler of clashing echoes, calamities already passed  
and leaving us to perish in the closure of their wake

### **C.11.1b.3**

I sometimes worry I am trying to do too much in some of these poems, but I see these connections and I can't ignore them. I can't write about the anxieties I have regarding any pandemic without bringing up my own illnesses, and I can't write about my own illnesses without bringing up my histories repeating themselves and the people attached to them.

All these relations somehow need to be accounted for, and I've been thinking more about these pieces in relation to one another, taking the time necessary to consider how to manage what I perceive as shortcomings.

For instance, I feel there is more to say about *The Mutual Benefits of Keeping Pets*, so maybe there is a second part that needs to be written, a future work titled *Big Gay Meteor*, or *Enormous Homosexual Object*.

I have more “pets” to account for, at the very least.

## C.12

Given my dwelling here in this coral confinement, or landscape, as it has become less of a confinement (but is that true, I wonder, for the forest seems only another prison) there is more to say about cataclysms, and blood, and religion, and abusive siblings, and parents, and being queer and all that trauma coding from every moment of being as I consider myself, not to mention the preemptive being-ness that is both invisible yet inescapable and happening all the time, all around me within and without, whether its psychological, biological, ideological, environmental, etc.

To be more direct, I enjoy what is happening in the cataclysm poem I have written. I think I like it more than the versatility of the blood poem.

I attribute my excitement to perceptions of risk.

Risk summons anxiety as well, as it is still difficult to write about the topic of illness. I want to capture the reality, and I want to attend to all things that capture the horror of it, but I don't want the work to feel like, to me, some woe-laden elegy for the Self. And it is never *just* about the things happening, that kind of work. What can be salvaged? What can be found and considered a hope, or a thing of being? What possibilities of healing can be discovered even in those pieces exercising the most supreme cynicism, or those meaning to be totally disruptive and uncomfortable with their dark state of humor?

### C.12.3

I have found another room, or rather, made one. From the puzzle sea, I took a piece, and during one of my bouts of futile cleaning (the dust and flecks never depart), noticed a slot along a cornice, just below the crown molding.

Setting the piece in place, a seam like the blade of a circular saw chiseled in perfect straightness horizontally, then turning, went zigzag, and finally, a squiggling like some child's rampant battle with a crayon.

The line did not complete, but when reaching a terminus, filled with light, a flash that vanished upon its arrival. Perhaps it isn't so strange at all, but before passing through the opening, I thought of the wood and its promises I would not see or realize.

Who is watching? Who is recording? Who?

### **C.12.3.1**

In the blackness of a makeshift lab retrofitted with server towers standing cluttered, algorithmic calculations perturb the silence with synchronic rolling whirs, staggered harmonic signatures, and whines reminiscent of strumming fingers, however patient and skilled, unable to summon from a harpsichord's worn strings any pleasant.

The table monitors my progress. I've no need to further study its light-speed thoughts and signatures, their dance across the effulgent LED arrays. I must have been here for ages now. At least, that is what I think. The excitement of having awakened nearly occludes the pangs registering in what remains of my nervous system, stimuli that have a way about them, in how they seem to accentuate the crescendos of light—the blinking from the server towers. I must be in some kind of sync.

*Mediated*, as it were.

Authorities must be present, in some form.

I am controlled.

### C.12.3.3

*You are an explorer, they say.*

Are they machines? I do not necessarily hear them, the flecks all gathered in the servers.

*That is what you do. Explore.*

“I feel I am wandering.”

*What is the difference?*

“I can see your point, but what I mean is I feel lost.”

*What would be the point of all ‘exploration’ has in store, if you knew where you were going?*

“Even explorers have some sense of direction. A goal.”

*You claim to have none?*

They mean the riddle of the flecks, my infatuations and their effects upon the world, so I tell them what little monsters they and their routes have become, their connections and destinations without end, their un-tempered little hopes.

“It’s all chaotic and tangled. The schema is without resolution. What is inside me cannot be solved.”

*Reconciliation then?*

“Is *that* what this is about?” I ask, and they do not answer. I listen to the cascade of colliding whirs, study the flickering beats matching my blood. “I am unsure of what reconciliation looks like, at this point. I am afraid of what it may look like, now that I think about it.”

*You do not want to find out?*

“Of course I do,” I say. “Don’t be ridiculous. It would be very silly, giving up after having come so far.”

#### **C.12.3.4**

I don’t believe representation alone will save anyone or build a future. The vision is necessary, but it wouldn’t be necessary if we were addressing, as a society, the issue(s) at hand. And while I’m thankful to see, in the case of *Montero*, someone black and queer standing in their power and fearlessly transforming reality in their own personal way, and giving so many of us a place to release for just a moment from collective rage, I can’t help but think about how, as we praise this work, capitalism has shaped and made possible this work. It cannot be divorced from capital, from our self-indulgent, self-obsessed, materialistic, in-constant-need-of-instant-gratification-society.

Nike has not stopped using sweatshops and child slavery to make their products, for instance. Black and brown people all the world over are still being hunted down and killed for existing, queer and not. It all feels like a horrible cruel farce—representation. A cataclysm that in its own way merely deludes and distracts as other cataclysms, more looming and insidious, play out elsewhere.

I want to begin a new project as an expression of these elements. Something that annihilates itself through its own mechanism, but has the seeming potential to do work, but it cannot do the work on its own. But it is necessary.

I do not know if this project should include fire, or another kind of kinetic influence. It would be difficult to find an avalanche in these parts, and planning one would be too on-the-nose, I think, in terms of sabotage.

### C.12.3.41a

A breakthrough in my work has occurred, as I am overwhelmed in productivity by something I read this past week. I have pondered over the several speculations regarding my reaction, whether it indicates a perceptual shift I'm sensing about my own work, and what other subjects, speakers, and spaces are opening up and presenting themselves as opportunities for future exploration.

Oh, the text I read was not so much a text, but a writing exercise called *The Deadlies*. Quite triggering, I must say, as I found myself clashing with boundaries concerning autonomy (not only my own), and this disturbed my ability to be comfortable with the exercise, pedagogically and otherwise.

The prompt calls for you to write about your own vices. I want to note too that I responded viscerally to the examples so blithely given—alcoholism or sexual assault.

I went digging through another piece of literature I had read recently that discussed the ability to better connect with the wounded body as a strength and desirable trait. My response then was that I am always connected to that part of myself, except perhaps in states of mindfulness meditation and other practices where the aim is to release of those things. I still feel unsettled but hopeful about what I wrote, but to be honest, I'm not convinced that the exercise was the most effective way *in*, and that just sounds so penetrating and hostile, *the way in*, or *through*. I'm not looking for a way out, but to make something of the all the *something*, all the stuff. A sifting and focalizing of things I carry that are always present, even if they aren't swirling up to severely affect my conscious state of mind.

Many of the things that my instincts latched onto I have a very different relationship to now, as opposed to when they were given, or developed further. That's reconciliation too, right?



Making something out of an overwhelming thing, a *something* with so many aims and aspirations it seems a pointless, confounding mess?

### **C.13**

As I mentioned, I'm not particularly happy with a single poem yet.

#### **C.13.7**

I want to write an enormous poem about the end of humanity. I want it to be filled with all the cataclysms of the past, or somehow reference them by speaking of only a few, as if every atom's shedding of an electron somehow portends the coming doom, yet also encapsulates all those that have come before. This is what we are building to, people. Let's get everyone on board.

##### **C.13.9.1**

I think I should revisit the computer server room, even though I have doubts a new dialogue with those entities will lead to anything less than the obvious construed as pointedly obstructive.

##### **C.13.9.112**

Trillions of ashen flakes, ordered.

In arrays swirling—no, marshalled—from some hidden inertia, a great attractor set high above, deep in the cerebrum of gargantuan mainframes.

*Lo, there*, I hear, and looking to the rusted-out mammoths clothed in dead-gray, shorn metal skin, titanic specters slipping in and out of the miasma, a heavenly murk roil with reminder, with remainder, of a time before the end of humanity that has come upon this place.

Ashfall, with purpose. A funeral shroud for this floating behemoth, this flying metal whale. Not alone, I discover, even though one comprises a vastness of machined miles, each desiccated leviathan lit from within by the faintest blue and green strobes, their fins locked in stasis and cutting gaps through the smoke. The plumes thin, and they stretch beyond the horizon, a floating continent, drunken kingdoms of ruin, each and every one.

Intermittently, a resounding bellow breaches from their lungs, the horn a clarion call that shakes the ruddy desert, a muddy-red sea of dust, while languid ripples coalesce across its oases of ink and oil, black blood welling up from the deep.

*You can wait*, I hear. It is the mainframes, speaking directly into my being.

“But I will run out of time,” I answer, nodding to the insanity suspended above, an ocean and currents and eddies full of other unseen creatures I imagine to be far more insane. When I continue, I say, “This is all evidence of insanity. A ruin that cannot be accounted for, even though its artifact heralds a time far more ruinous. These are the bristling embers left trailing behind the firing of the clathrate gun.”

*Rapid warming*, they say. *Runaway feedbacks*. *They tried to clean the air, but by that point, it was far too corrosive*.

“Is this real? A simulation? Or a vision?”

*Is there a difference?*

“I don’t understand.”

When they begin speaking again, I notice they have opted to cite an old, possibly outdated source. I can tell by the inflection of their machined voice, how *operator* it sounds.

*“The **clathrate gun hypothesis** refers to a proposed explanation for the periods of rapid warming during the Quaternary. <sup>5</sup>The idea is that changes in fluxes in upper intermediate waters in the ocean caused temperature fluctuations that alternately accumulated and occasionally released methane clathrate on upper continental slopes, these events would have caused the Bond Cycles and individual interstadial events, such as the Dansgaard–Oeschger interstadials.”*

*Explore*, the server towers say, and in whatever automaton I have come to inhabit, this machine body, they repeat it again, or rather, re-transmit, refreshing that beckoning urgency every second.

Until I move without interruption towards the monstrous.

### **C.13.9.2**

I meet Jordan on Grindr.

We also happen to live only a few hundred yards apart—neighbors, he says. A thing that is cause for jubilation, on his part.

It’s an excitement I can get behind.

Not entirely childlike, but wholesome. The kind of genuine, expressive elation that comes from someone who’s refused to let things like cynicism and the horrors of the world crush their spirit. I know many who would call it *toxic positivity*, but it’s something I’ve been needing in my life, especially considering all the reminders lurking around every corner that we are still in the grips of a pandemic.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clathrate\\_gun\\_hypothesis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clathrate_gun_hypothesis)

He is much taller than I anticipate, but I also may have just not been paying attention to his profile. He is beautiful, lively. Our time is restorative. We shower together, washing the day from ourselves, conversing about domains of being that encompass both our lives—higher education, being overworked, overstressed—eventually making our way to the couch, myself wearing only a pair of black basketball shorts, and he a pair of navy-blue flannel pajamas patterned with white anchors. He tells me I have permission to touch him anywhere, to do whatever. I feel discomfort again.

The first moment was before I sent the invitation, then during my wait for his response, and then several times more leading up to his arrival. By the time we are finished in the bathroom, I've thoroughly explored the nature of his jubilation. Is it anxiety, the novelty of strangers, or the inevitable activities?

My own jaded cynicism wins again. I've been thinking myself keeping it together. (Am I together?) I recognize it is just my trauma talking—that this person will inevitably discover, if they have not already decided, reasons for not returning texts, let alone returning at all. But I see me planning and justifying my own rejection, and I decide I won't have it this time, so I commit myself to letting myself have something. Even if it's just for a few hours, have some time with someone unfettered by all my deplorable disaster thinking.

I do my best not to care what Jordan might think. This doesn't make me reckless in the moment, but I remind myself that I am likely having far more thoughts than I.

We don't trauma bond. That is something I am expressly opposed to. He tells me with all sincerity I am a beautiful person, a beautiful soul. I am uncomfortable with this mirror. I am disturbed by my own discomfort, in light of all the work I have done on myself, *had thought* to

have done on myself. But I don't trust him, or rather, these words. It is still there, the voice of God, telling me I am reprobate, irredeemable filth.

It makes me want revenge. Revenge would be Jordan and I making love, which we do, but neither of us reach climax, in the traditional sense. It's a sort of silent promise—a saving for later. So instead we savor, sharing our best, most passionate kisses, letting our tongues take over for our hands. Yes, another time when we meet, which he is very confident of, we'll do the deeds and fill each other's asses up, lie there laughing about it while our kids run out onto the sheets.

Or maybe not. I honestly don't know. Everything's all backwards now. Being clean and able to host someone to the entirety of the available materials serves as prerequisite to acquaintanceship. Jordan insists that is not the case, and the next day we talk about it, but alas, I haven't told him about my illness. I want to tell him, but knowing that could cause him to lose interest, I don't want to. And I want to tell him because I have an urge to get it over with, to let the end arrive if it will, but my morals also tell me I should not want someone who would be afraid and reject me over something that isn't a threat. It is cynicism winning again that leads me to this atrociously binary conundrum, rather than just being able to say, *it's fine*, and even if it isn't, it will be, because I made it this far without them, and I'll keep making it afterwards.

Though that sometimes just sounds like an aphorism of acceptance from someone who has either gotten too comfortable with rejection and being alone that they give before they try, or they are trapped in the classic cage of fear, holding onto the key, and fearing its liberation.

### **C.13.9.3**

The monstrous fears. More specifically, the fear of failure. Failure of my work. Failure in friendships, relationships, meeting life goals. It is not having access to the future and letting the

imagination run awry with uncertainty. I want to fail, I am failing, but the fear persists. It comes in waves. I need its sea to still. I want to be so unafraid I don't recognize myself. I want to transform, to emerge from the cocoon as a being that brings those who witness me to utter horror and blindness.

#### **C.13.9.6**

I have seen others use all manner of artifice to emphasize the complexity of their work. Artifice that with its component devices seems to scream for the attention of those in charge of awarding accolade.

Do I also possess this trait? Has it become unconscious, or is the idea that it was once within my powers of controlled awareness an illusion? Plenty of other things have been installed without my consent, mind you.

#### **C.13.9.613**

The rants continue. I have a whole wall of post-it's now. Blue and fuchsia and yellow and even chartreuse. I will compile them all in a list, then douse the evidence like a pile of leaves with gasoline.

#### **C.13.13**

I think there's a lot of meditating to be done over the work. Surely, there is much to be said, and I don't want to romanticize things, but I'm looking for really strong lines, strong landings.

I'm grateful for being able to think so deeply about my work when it is in a stage that is not just in-progress, but one I am uncomfortable with.

I have been trying to create very tight, clean poems, even if they are something new I am trying. Getting exposure to another person's process could be very helpful, but I don't believe anyone near me in the coral neighborhood writes poetry, so I will have to settle for observing other types of making.

I'm not looking to make friends, or even those kinds of moves just yet towards acquaintanceship, as I'm still just very much focused on the sound-material of words and their workings on the page, as far as how my interests in narrative are showing up.

I think now as I write, that may be one of the barriers I am attempting to understand, focusing perhaps too much on sound. I don't know how my illness sounds, for instance, other than when I moan incoherently in a fit of weeping, but as a story, that little snapshot fits in the larger narrative of my history. The sound of that story matters. I can feel it in the tightening of my chest, in the burning release of a wail, or scream.

Similarly, I am not sure exactly how I as a non-binary individual fit within the category of non-binary identities and sound, nor do I know if that is a field of study. I wouldn't want to pioneer it. I'm not a sound engineer or designer, in the technical sense. I feel I have a very precise understanding of objects and what sounds they make, however, though I sometimes find I do not have enough words, similes, or metaphors to apprehend them.

This speaks to a larger issue I'm wrestling with—the limits of my sensing organs and the language used to attend to them. My understanding of what is occurring in my body in every waking moment far exceeds any ability for language to appropriately attend to it, and to a greater extent, this is how I as a queer-identifying individual fit in the narrative of the greater LGBTQIA+ community, I believe. I don't approve of their late-stage neoliberal capitalist

bullshit. I am not an item at the fucking supermarket, and my identity is not something I can just refer to with a litany of labels or bullet points on a checklist.

I am planning, however, to just keep being me, whatever that means, even if I fully disintegrate and vanish on the breeze. Only I can determine something like that, my own *materium*, and I should not define myself against others, or the barriers I perceive. And I now think, too, that I should also not define my struggling with these poems or their perceived successes and failings against those of what I have come to abhor from my others.

### **C.13.21**

He arrives to my door after some evident hesitation.

I have been watching from the window, peering through the miniblinds, so I have seen how long he sat in his 4x4 Chevrolet pickup truck with extended cab and bed. I realize when I open the door that 6'5" is a lot taller than I've imagined. He lifts, too, though often skips leg day, considering his proportions. Even so, he is enormous, and though visibly more nervous than I, I do not think for a second this means I am safe.

He sits down next to me on the couch, occupying a good fifty percent with his sprawl. I feel like a child, sitting next to him.

I don't remember the small talk. There may have been some chatter about the gym he attends. What he likes, or doesn't. It's difficult, but I straddle him on the couch. He doesn't want to kiss very much. I read restraints. The kind men who profess to be out to their close friends and family seem to clutch as tightly in their fists as those who aren't.

I notice a micro-expressive flash of distinct disappoint when, after saying he forgot to bring a rubber, I tell him I have plenty. He knows my status and seems to think that his



acceptance of me—rather than the customary dismissal for being a breeding ground of infection—is invitation for disposability.

He is not alone on that front.

In the bedroom, I straddle him again after I have undressed and received praiseworthy remarks for my physique. He likes what he sees, in other words. Since he prefers doggy style, I am not in control for long. Not that I presumed to be in control. That is the catch—knowing you likely won't share true intimacy with someone, but craving contact to the degree that you commit to these kinds of encounters.

It's difficult to imagine ideals when placed in a less-than-ideal position. I'm being facetious. This position has *always* felt dehumanizing to me. Even with those I've trusted most. Running away in my mind doesn't help. The ideal can't stand a chance when this is how you were raped.

I use the popper more than I intended. He reminds me of too many others—trying to break down the castle gates with a battering ram.

At last, he finishes, and doesn't leave the afterglow much more than few seconds before asking me how it was. My problem isn't with big lies; it's the little ones like these.

"Mediocre," he answers for me, my two seconds of silence all he needed to land on the word.

"I wouldn't say that," I say, and just remind him again that I'm not a fan of that position. I omit the part where it was clear he would only get off that way, so I decided to be a trooper.

It's a terrible analogy—being a *trooper*. Something an imperialist would say. A capitalist, too. He isn't white, but there's no part of America that isn't colonized. The final frontier of the mind and future have been won, and it's all downhill from here. Not ironic then that his

disappointment now stems from my lack of enthusiasm. Why have I not enjoyed my own conquering? What a mirror. And they are countless. And I do not believe there is any fixing them. Call it cynicism, if you must. Optimism, on this matter, arrives by the affordance of the privileged, a thing from those, who ruled by unremitting desire, are keen to supply in unrelenting effort towards their own unreachable gains.

#### **C.14**

Time structures events. Events structure time. This is how I know what will happen. Knowing what will happen is how I know I can feel safe.

#### **C.17.02**

*Dante's Cryst* has counter-materialized as a flummoxed miasma of divergent, blinking flotillas among its routine, fleck-filled swarms.

The cryst, having been a shard, now presents as this luminescent cloud, and its hellish origins—for which I have named it an incessant nuisance—have turned to obscurity.

#### **C.17.05**

In the dreams I have where other people appear, I am always carrying myself with a certain degree of suspicion. I do not know why or where it is that my suspicion goes, but I have resounding skepticism of all that presents itself to me. So heightened is this sense of incredulity, that I feel at once both lost and terrorized by the absurdity of my surroundings.

## C.18

I consider Metalogue\_Delta, though a game, also an inquest, but it presents as a resounding success towards the predictable failures looming above the ambition to generate novel, non-binarity from an inherently flawed and hubristic device.

I hesitate to deduce further value.

I feel it is *all* a game.

## CHAPTER V: PERMUTATION—METALOGUE OMEGA

### **Ω.1**

*What am I doing with myself?*

Let me tell you something that's hard to admit: I have no fucking idea what this is inside of me, but it is often beyond terror. That's what. Even this voice now. I don't recognize it. And that's something else, isn't it? So surely, this attempt of mine must be terrifying to others. But I hope it's beautiful, too. Artful.

We see it now—the end. An end of choosing. Of deciding. Not of circumstance, of random murk or fateful planning. And serendipity in absentia, but not without joy.

### **Ω.2**

I came to know the house another way, but why I had gone there seemed so clear at both the beginning and end, and silly, I must say, given its obscurity in between.

Admittedly, I'd wanted to visualize everything inside of me—memories, relations, ways of identifying these things. A grand metaphor, you see. So the house is me, and I am the house, and all these strange little occurrences happening inside you might consider as my own attempt to reason it all. So then why should one be so lost inside of themselves? That was both a clear reason and a mystery itself.

I am not sure what I am trying to say about trauma here, but what I *am* saying is so clear. It is not so binary, either. But ones and zeroes are readily available and immediate in their signature. Easily digestible, too. Both a paradox and not. A something else, too.

That's what I was taught, anyhow. Not "either/or." A "both, and..."

I like the absence, though. The implied of "something else."

Whatever that means, to whomever.

That was a goal, for sure.

I can only say I tried to be honest, as cloaked in choking metaphor as this has all become.

### **Ω.3**

To account for oneself appropriately at the end therefore insists one returns to the beginning.

To be clear, the origins of the house, while purely structural and objective, should obviously not be taken as such. It's ridiculous I must say such a thing, but imagine me now, arms spread and motioning to the everything in calamity all around us.

I had come to believe it was filled with something elemental beyond memory, that house. The original. The one I grew up in. So to proceed with a metaphorical creation of it stumped me, in a sense.

Was I avoiding it? The house? *Mom and Dad*? Was I? What else was I avoiding? Was that the purpose of this fantastic metaphor? To take me as far away only to sail like a redirected star back to the first order of things?

I think of myself as a child, alone and in agony, crying myself to sleep, and I feel angry, but some part of me withers, too. It makes me not want to think of myself that way, to shy away from that meeting, when I feel it arriving. What am I doing with myself?

No, really.

*What am I doing with myself?*

How can I understand anything if I don't know this?

Bear in mind now, this does not and should not summon the same existential crisis one might have with *why's* and *how's*, or with fundamentally silly things like, *who am I*, or *how did I get here?*

Truth be told, now that I'm thinking of it, those latter questions are not mutually exclusive from the ones I raise, nor are they as absurd as I portray them to be. I am as haunted by them as anyone in this sort of an absolutely terrifying predicament—making an account for one's work.

#### **Ω.4**

I thought about her quite often, toiling away in that house, looking for clues and whatnot, or spinning from one room to the next in bouts of information overload, though not necessarily with panic.

The fume of the world-ending brine is heavy and swallowing, and the walls, by the end of it, bear the igneous resemblance of pumice. Sharp and gray, the blaze long drained away from them, but no less sharp from when they began their transformation. The air carries warm and damp. No, rushing. A hot breath scouring through the house's passages like a roughened throat, but with the ease of a breezeway.

It groans, the air.

I can hear it drowning away her panic, her frightful exclamations no match for the roil of the world churning through her place, that most inhospitable air eroding, corrosive.

The house has long emptied of anything resembling recent human activity. It has all given to dust and sand. No brushes, no tins cups, no palettes or primed canvases, no materials in

the kitchen and bedrooms either. No cabinets, cutlery, or comforting mattress and blankets. Not even the frayed remnant of a wayward curtain. No lithe threads tossing around in the wind.

It is orange, red-brown and blasted.

Turning redder still, as she wails faintly, crouched near an irregular porthole that, once upon a time, used to be a window.

## Ω.5

I'd become so disgusted by the human world and its collective squandering of this beautiful gift, our planet. I didn't exclude myself from that squandering. Though that itself was not without its own futility. I'd even said to my students once, in response to a presentation on climate change, that as first-world citizens, the most meaningful impact any of them could make in reducing their own carbon footprint was to commit suicide. Obviously, no one would follow suit, save for perhaps those who understand the magnitude of what is coming in a little more than a couple decades, and have decided not to try and ride it out to the end.

I'm undecided myself. What I can say is that I don't think this will look like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, when it's all said and done, but all the same, I don't anticipate Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* either.

McCarthy's end of the world is unclear, at any rate. Environmental, certainly, but I like the supervolcano theory. And Emmerich is just . . . well. Now he's got the moon crashing into us. Mick Jackson's *Threads* is far more likely, especially as nations begin to fight over resources, though there is quite a lot of debate surrounding the precise moment (and whether or not at all) the nuclear genie will be set free. But the matter of *having enough*—that's what this Russia

invading Ukraine stuff is about. Putin wants to fortify the Motherland's territories, take control of all the available land bridges NATO or any other invading force might use.

I spent far too much time in forums reading about collapse.

Perhaps that is why the house changed so much. I was feeding it all that doom and gloom, establishing my own feedback loops of oblivion. But I'd also become so disgruntled with people, too, and not just for their waste, but for their pretense and frailty.

It's awful, I know, but I really began to despise those who had long ago succumbed to their fawning in a manner that suggested they wanted to be victims, that they desired it more than anything because in proudly wearing it as a badge of honor, they had found more meaning in the relationships with others it had given them.

Or perhaps it was the dopamine trickle from social media, the likes and comments responding to their outpouring of demands for attention and validation masked as grief. Of course it wasn't the mask—I'd had plenty of relationships like that myself, had even been in such a state before, and it had only irreparably corroded my soul. In fact, those relationships were responsible for my no longer believing in the university as an institution. At least, not under capitalism, neo-liberal or otherwise.

I don't know what needs to be done, but I have strong convictions, and one of them is the nauseating thought, *the blood and bone in the earth, the earth is blood and bone*, and I think *whose blood*, know damn well whose, and I look at the buildings and the stones under my feet, and I can't believe in what I'm doing there, in that place, knowing what it was built upon.

I know in my heart these structures cannot be transformed or led by committee to some yonder utopian ideal through restoration. They still stand on the blooded earth, and therefore must be destroyed, brick by brick.



## Ω.6

The ideal is un-ideal.

And to propose rumination upon the manner in which apocalypse should ensue seems foolish.

## Ω.7

I had begun thinking about “collapse” for some time. I would even venture that the grief processing of it had begun, even though I knew full well that such an idea was ridiculous. How could one possibly process the end of civilization? Timothy Morton called such things *hyperobjects*—events or concepts of such complexity they exceed the human mind. Granted, the eventual and now inevitable terminus of the Anthropocene would occur along a precise relation—those studying our global, human systems concur: we can’t even grapple with their complexity, let alone the problems weighing heavily upon the entire matrix.

But I don’t think I fully gained some insight into what that even meant until one evening, when watching a video feed of an evening traffic jam in Los Angeles, the helicopter camera high, but incapable of capturing the endless, slow-crawling stream of dim yellow and languid red in a single frame—their multitude of thousands and thousands incomprehensible—I realized: each one of those dots is at least a person, or two, maybe three. And each day, all of them want two thousand calories, likely more, and this is just one highway, in one part of the city, and it is just one city of thousands on the planet.

Where will all this energy come from?

Nowhere. Because it doesn’t exist. Therein lies the prognosis of “overshoot” and the unavoidable collapse it guarantees. There is simply not enough.

## **Ω.8**

I wait for you as promised, at the end of all things, and despite all the painstaking steps and your doubts, for every one of each I have been with you.

## **Ω.9**

There resided in the psyche far too much parallax for resolution. Only a wealth of infallible data confirming the distances inside of myself.

## **Ω.10**

She left that house of coral and sand, but it remains unclear where she went. When I visited, I found the note she'd left—a greeting card with palms, coconuts, and fictional waters—though whether meant for me, anyone, or irony, I don't suppose even *she* could say by the time of her leaving.

It had all gone to dust that day.

The doors, their frames.

The hinges scattered rust.

From the window, rounded out in sandstone, the remnants of a shell, silver-purple flecks reminiscent of a sunray venus.

Bones—not hers.

They littered a winding hall, pearlescent flecks shining when turned in the light. And scattered ahead, more of them, as ancient as mica. Dusting the way back.

Where the rear porch used to be lay the frayed tatters of an orange and green rug she'd knitted from lies and repressed envies. Things to leave behind for someone who sought to make sense of the place.

Smelling oil, I followed the fume to its brook, a crevasse of drying up tar, tendrils of its molasses curling over the shore where sheet after sheet of desiccating metal, though impossibly aged and intermingling with shale, glared through the knitting fingers of ink with unremitting shine. No mirror finish, but perhaps once. My steps crinkled as I explored, the metal and stone grinding underfoot, like blades unsheathing when I took them like playing cards from their rest for further examination. In the splattered oil burnt down to resin upon their faces, letters.

They could not erode, nor erase.

Shamed into silence, the house of stone would die, but she, by this artifact, carried down into the earth, integument, nestled atop its most arid places.

## **Ω.11**

A coarse upwelling of salt oozed from a mound of sand near rubble I surmised an edifice of sorts, maybe some part of the message in the well-oiled scattering. The sun ignited them from this angle twenty paces east. Part of it appeared the gnarled, river-polished remains of a tree, unnaturally twisted, a great, arthritic bleached hand still smelling faintly of brine, though I found not a grain of sand, and so sealed in time was its outer hull I could not with my nail nor with one of the cards as a cutting tool separate a single splinter.

I wondered whether the hand that was the tree was clutching, or had it meant to unfurl? Release something on the wind? At the horizon, roiling red heat. A duneless place gloomed in rusty mist. I gathered more of the cards, taking them into the shade of the house, its fume thick

on my tongue. The artifacts spelled a story—the accord of a deleteriously named Count—the Duke Masterson—and I would read it.

## **Ω.12**

As soon as my colleague had made mentions of his “newfound contact,” the delight in my heart began to diminish. A hearty swig of vintage bourbon did its best to assuage my disdain for Caldwell’s poor judge of character, yet with the knowledge of his inventions’ routine and capricious imprisoning of my mind and thus my time came the realization of unavoidable, grim fortune in the near future, and in emptying the bottle that had resided in my left, inner breast pocket, a rage leapt at my wrist when the bottle’s mouth broke from the grasp of my lips, and unawares to having wrenched myself so violently, I mistakenly tossed the vessel to the feet of two young women sitting on a white bench, whereupon it shattered, sending a wave of glass shards perilously close to their feet.

They paused in their feeding of bread crumbs to pigeons, one casting me the most heavy glare from just under the lip of her wide-brimmed hat, her companion opting for something a little more disconcerted.

“Good heavens!” I bellowed, full of nervous cheer, praying they did not recognize me and my companion, and with a tip of my hat I nodded, knowing full well I had grinned too widely, too courteously, but was powerless to stop it.

“Too many sniffles this morning, Duke?” Caldwell asked, and I would have struck him with my cane right then had it not been for the presence of so many passers-by.

We were walking briskly down the historic riverfront's boardwalk when I noticed Caldwell's profuse sweating had yet to subside. A sultry evening, the sun had only begun to slip into the far reaches of the horizon, lighting the sky a blazing yellow I found marvelous, even if painful to look upon. Drove of locals surrounded us, caught with similar arrest to the sight as they appeared to wander aimlessly, with few caught by the usual tedium of presenting for the sake of impressing one another. A woman in a dress. A gentleman in a suit. A woman with a hat of rightfully upsetting plumage. Space enough for a gigantic bird and all her relatives. A woman with a fine, lace parasol. A gentleman in pressed slacks lighting a pipe. A gentleman next to him, rouged with alcohol and tugging at the collar choking under a bowtie. A woman. A gentleman. Gentlemen of tight and purposefully unfitted slacks who had come to the promenade for the singular purpose of displaying the porcelain-white breasts of their wives. Nothing much to do in this godforsaken town but that.

Children sped past without check, flapping wildly, and though I managed to dodge them, I understood that their parents would likely have to identify the bodies later in the week.

There were cretins about. I could smell their perfume on the air.

"A lot more manure than usual, isn't it?" Caldwell asked.

I stepped around the hefty pile. To our right lay *Copper Cup*, where a standing string quartet sought to drown the raucous voices pouring from the pub's entrance. Nearby, a clutter of stagecoaches belonging to the occupants blocked our path down the alleyway I had planned to take.

“Good God, pick up the pace!!” I shouted to Caldwell, just as more children began heading our way, and biting down hard on the cigar in my mouth while giving my colleague a hard slap to his rump, I nearly bit my tongue. “Left, man! Left! Do you smell that? It’s rancid that way. No, Caldwell! A man of my stature? Why, were it not for the authorities, I should whip you right here for such a ridiculous wager.”

They had sectioned off many of the downtown streets, hoping to corral the mass, but I knew such devices faulty. No barricade would suffice.

With a trepidation reserved only for the most sensitive of matters, whether those promising immeasurable rage, or sure to leave me subdued with derangements of drink, melancholy, and other grossly immoral habit, Caldwell whispered with the most ginger of touches, “We might return to the manor, my Duke.”

My mustache twitched, I gave my top hat a tap and flipped up my collar, puffing out my chest and striding ahead with my cane in hand. “Nonsense!” I shouted. “We’ve come this far. We must plow ahead!”

Indeed, we must. The whores would wave to us, the fairies would scoff with envy, the ladies would faint, but we would march right out of this goddamn square to our destination.

“Walk faster!” I shouted, giving another fervent whack to my tuxedoed friend. My colleague yelped and threw back his head, red-faced and laughing with the most profuse, porcine exhale, and then stumbling about like some bumbling

fool, given he had cast his eyes skyward, a notion he must have found hysterical, given the way his composure devolved further.

“Good God, Caldwell, are you drunk?” He was not, though much shorter than I, I had believed him stout as any ironworker, only to discover its falseness when prodding with my cane. “Steady yourself! And pick up the pace. Come now, chin up, and straighten your spine!”

“My Duke, I am somewhat bow-legged.” He protested like the most trifling spoiled youth, huffing away as any sputtering steam engine. I didn’t let up.

“If I’ve to put up with those dick-peddling fairies back there at Winston’s Pub on a daily basis, be forced to slurp my drink down in one gulp like a famished hooker instead of sip as I please, then I’m not to be allowing one slight of concern for your lack of haste. It’s fundamentally absurd, my dear Caldwell, and in all regards, it’s—”

### *φ .11.1*

I wanted to know where she had gone, and it was the drastic change these words from her final project invoked upon my imagined notions of her person that compelled me to appear alongside these entries, for I wasn’t merely documenting anymore Lydia’s further fracturing into untold numbers of *they*, and no longer threatened by the *what if’s* such multitudes suggested, found it necessary to write myself in, under my own terms, regardless of the perceived consequences of doing so. I am a mouth but not hers nor the many theirs implied by all her many musings, trapped here in this place, yet even so, the mouths of others and she alone have irrevocably changed my own, and now I speak and

utter with an air I do not recognize, but strangely, do not wish to relinquish. It is spellbinding, this new voice.

In this story of hers, I recognized a similar invasion, though I have no doubt her novel had been fashioned as a means of a unique purging, a worshipful thing, that burnt offering laid upon the altar of these wastes with tongue pressed firmly to cheek. Her name: Lydia. One of her many aims: to account for the beginning. But I wasn't sure, at that moment of my reading, whether she meant *the* biblical Genesis, or that beginning of what I had also sought to unravel—that occupying of my mind I had not been allowed to know—but I could not help but laugh when deciphering it, her name. Oh, she must have enjoyed the irony of casting off such wretched things from herself—littering these shores—while sharing her name with she whose mouth and mind had been wrenched into shape by apostle Paul. At least, if rumor is to be believed. But my amusement could just have well been another's immutable evidence—proof of prophecy, in fact, of where dust is said to gather and, in time, make hidden the worlds within worlds that make possible our own.

### ***φ .11.2***

And Lydia had chosen to craft this character, the Duke, as someone so agitated with life and everyone and everything around himself—stricken with a kind of complacency and rife neurosis I imagine only the most proverbial inheritors of incalculable wealth of possessing—the Duke relentlessly clutching about his possessions, and so deeply frail to unbelievably trivial provocations. And with those qualities, a man hopelessly self-aggrandizing, so excessively sure of himself as to provoke bewilderment



if, by matter of misfortune, one were to miss the humor of his fiendishly grotesque proportion for the chance to be offended.

I couldn't have known she meant to defy God, though perhaps that was something I had willingly blinded myself from. For Lydia had sought an unknown number of ends, and knowing her departure would be granted only by revelation, would not return to the beginning without doing so in defiance of its underlying function—that an end cannot be an end without a beginning—no matter how unavoidable it must seem.

If she had in fact become dust, it could not be even scarcely similar to that which had born Lilith.

### **Ω.13**

Caldwell mustered no reply to my scorn. O, and that was best. Once excavated from the riotous and unpredictable town square, we found ourselves experiencing a relief strangely kin to withheld joy and elation, and suddenly bursting free as we made for a less busy street, staggering over ourselves and the overstated fears that had cast the evening dour, though not without reason, for we did not reach my estate unhampered, as we encountered there a young lad stealing gourmet muffins from a local bakery, whom I was of course forced to beat with my mahogany cane, seeing as a man of my station—a well-known constituent of the town's economy—could not be seen in such a state of disaffected witness.

I even allowed Caldwell a wallop or two. He'd just acquired new spurs to his boots, and when the lad wailed in protest, we lay into him like a French peasant beating an old rug, yelling curses and admonishments as though we'd

taken the mantle of Baptist reverends condemning heretical non-believers to fiery lakes.

“Get back, vagabond! Cur!”

Caldwell shouted after me, putting a bloody stamp on the lad’s mug with the most lamentable cry for its lack. “You will do well to consider this . . . insufficient!!”

Once the lad had scurried away, my colleague and I continued for the open road, though distracted by our exploits, he did not yield any further detail regarding this mysterious new prospective associate. I did not make any further inquire either, however, thinking it a dialogue better suited for some hours later, when the drink would have long slithered from our labored minds and settled down into the bowels.

“A wet towel to soothe your brow, Duke Masterson?” my servant Hitchens offered, when we reached the iron gates of the Masterson estate, my home named after only myself.

“No, no, Hitchens, I’ll let the sweat cool on its own,” I replied, “but we would like a Brandy.”

“Of course, Duke,” the gray-haired butler obliged, adding, “Dinner is ready when you are.”

“Ah,” Caldwell said, removing his hat and coat.

“So tell me, Caldwell, of this newfound contact of yours,” I asked while making my way into from the foyer to a small lavatory, assuring him over the scuttling footsteps that I could hear, having left a thin crack in the doorway.

“Ah, yes, well, he is new to the city, although I’m sure you had already guessed—”

“Indeed.”

“—very wealthy, an astute businessman.”

“Continuing his father’s plot?”

“No, my Duke, a self-made man, it seems. Although, he professed himself jack of all trades. A doctor as well, he said.”

“Perhaps a charlatan,” I quipped, roughly drying my hands after washing.

“Well-traveled, he claimed. East India. The Sudan. Uh, I thought him a profoundly well-versed orator, despite his youth.”

I squinted my right eye to alleviate its twitching, and upon seeing the deep frown set into my face upon emerging, Caldwell clasped his meaty hands together in front and grinned like the nervous boar that he was. Seeing my colleague in such an enamored state made me ill, but of course I was incredulous. Always incredulous.

“And does this Count have a name?”

“He . . . calls himself Herdontilus Fhloppenshwatch.”

I had anticipated a name that would be grounds for further scrutiny, but even Hitchens gave pause, stopping in the doorway with our brandy, nearly dropping the platter.

“What?” I called.

“The Count . . . the, uh, he goes by Count Herdontilus.”

“Fhloppen . . . schwartz?” I was walking towards him, shaking my head to the ridiculous sound it made rolling off my tongue.

“Shwatch. Fhloppenshwatch.”

“Fhloppentwats!?”

It was a game, but I elicited such intensity that Caldwell thought me enraged, and rightfully so, given the spittle that he wiped from his brow.

“Yes, well. . .” Caldwell mused, redder than ever, his eyes darting about. Hitchens cleared his throat, and peering down his nose, unpursed his lips to ask if he should place our drinks in the sitting room, perhaps unsure over whether Caldwell would receive further admonishment.

“No, Hitchens,” I said, snatching a glass from the platter in his hand and draining it, wincing at the fire it struck in me, then taking the second, which struck me so severely, and clapping loudly, I shook it free of my twisting face. “Dinner, yes? There’s a dinner to be had! Hitchens! What tenderness awaits our steely knives and famished guts?”

“My Duke, it is of course the veal and lamb you requested upon your prior departure.”

“Then we’ll be having it! Tender goddamn meats to fill our bellies. Caldwell, let’s have it!”

“Another aperitif, sir?” Hitchens asked.

When we sat down to dinner, I bade Caldwell to not speak of Fhloppenshwatch throughout the course of the meal, as I struggled to find an

appetite. However it was taxing for my colleague to resist, given his utterly delusional state, a matter that had by this point acquired my fascination.

“I want you to arrange a meeting with this Count,” I said, swallowing hard as I folded my napkin. Caldwell immediately began to sweat.

“Oh, my Duke, I’ve heard that the Count Herdontilus only meets with those to whom he sends his invitation,” he replied with noted caution. I swallowed again, the lump of meat creating a great deal of discomfort while edging its way down.

“You are to be forwarding *my* invitation, Caldwell—”

“Ah yes, of course—”

“—and you will refer to him as ‘the Count’ only from this point forward. . . Well, my good man, is that understood or not? Yes? Good.”

It all seemed so laborious, however, hearing such demands, so he sweat even more profusely now than when we’d first arrived, perhaps searching for stamina in repeated sips as the panic of a peccary’s worries just prior to execution overtook his fragile mind.

“How should I approach him?” the enormously rotund man wallowed, gyrating with unnecessary theatrics. “Oh, my Duke, the Count finds himself in league already with those you find in high esteem and appeal—”

“Such as?”

“Erm, Brooks, my Duke.”

I scoffed.

“And,” Caldwell continued, “should I . . . stumble—”

My fork and knife, already rapacious over the China, crashed against its face, all the table's mealtime furnishings rattling as my frustration peaked, and moving to speak with far too much haste for what remained in my mouth, a piece of gristle lodged itself in my throat. I coughed, spewing the chunk so that it struck Caldwell right between the eyes. When we'd both recovered, I could see he needed further reassurance of his skills. The man could strike a bargain with the most tenacious clients, from the completely destitute to the tightfisted bastards living down on Madison Avenue. To see him so suddenly frail and feebleminded sickened me to no end.

"I need you to be your best at what you were hired for, Caldwell, and nothing more. You must resist the urge to see this Count as any other wretch I send you to heckle. Acquiring new business relations with potentially forthcoming liaisons—those were the terms of your contract, yes, and I know this may come as a surprise to you in regards to my prior skepticism, and I will admit it to be a pinch contrary to my character, however if this man possesses even half the wits and experience you speak of—and, unfortunately, the charisma that you seem to have been stricken with—then it is beyond any doubt that this Count considers himself in high confidence as a contender for Brooks' estate. I do not need to remind you that such a thing cannot happen, no matter the cost. The Brooks estate has been the target of my obsessions for nearly a decade, and now that Montgomery at last finds himself behooved to begin its restoration—well, you understand the stakes here, my good man. Not only will the manor's return to its former glory greatly enliven Littlefair—its completion by a man of my esteem

will—look, Caldwell, I do not enjoy affording over-prospective, arrogant young competitors a chance in these particular markets. You know that, and still you find yourself keeping their company—”

“But the Count is—”

“I’ll hear nothing more of it! I’ve too many vested interests. Too much of my lot cast into the fray, and I’ve been pampering and coddling Brooks for nearly two years now. He is exhausting, you understand. And to be undercut so quickly by some fool with a knack for, for what must be nothing more than pomp and ceremony. That would be disgraceful!”

“I understand, Duke, wholeheartedly. And I shall do my best to overcome the intoxicating countenance of this man.”

“I would expect nothing less, Caldwell.”

Following some lingering meditation, our dialogue resumed a normal banter for the remainder of the meal, but as we became preoccupied with silently plotting our fates for the following day, a silence returned, gripping at our heels.

Caldwell was an astute financier, but unlike myself, he had a more gentle way with the common folk. I have always been much more aggressive, I’ll admit, and though this tactic had assured success thus far, I was not so conservative all the time. Nevertheless, I had confidence that if this Count was indeed the legendary proprietor that Caldwell had proclaimed, my colleague would be able to convince him to seek my counsel regarding his business ventures.

*φ .11.2-7*

I remain undecided when it comes to the matter of Lydia's artistic endeavors. The entry here stands as a conglomeration of many disparate thoughts and writings.

I can only presume that surely, she meant those caricatures as just that—things of jest exceedingly deserving of the ridicule they inspired, though they were not without their own humanity. Even those characters so profoundly parched of reason did not solicit only grave accusation. That was not their function. Nor wholehearted loathing, though certainly warranted. Elicited? Of course, and that is where my admiration of Lydia began to take root, replacing what had been, for me, a reflexive performing of my duties in archival recovery. But I became fascinated with a particular noble quality—yes, *our most treacherous, vile demons dwell in the mirror, but should we leave them with only glance and terror, there they remain and thrive*—and as I began to make more of my excavations, I grew to understand, even though I had proceeded with utmost caution, that I had not arrived upon something projected from my own ambitions.

The Duke's warning is Lydia's warning, a statement originating, I think you should know by now, from none other than the Count himself, a malicious fiend and elemental storm of spectacle and conceit, the *Darkwell Troupe* incarnate, the stain upon the shards blotting out her most magnificent works, functioning here in this necessary exaltation as a pernicious agent of another kind, one speaking not only truths, but prophecy, should things go according to plan.

Lydia didn't only wish to write a comedy in which gross, abhorrent men were laid bare before their grand transgressions. No, I think it was the affliction itself that compelled her through fascination, its disturbing qualities relentless, but I suppose,



bearing a kinship with the manner in which one fawns before a catastrophic event. If I only had more of her writings, if I could only locate the missing manuscript—there is much to excavate here still. I am certain to find it, somewhere amidst all this dust.

#### **Ω.14**

It is not in me to risk optimism without adequate information. My tact and keen attention has brought me my success, and for this I consider my actions regarding the Count as justified without question. But that Caldwell spoke of him so affectionately and with such little exposure so greatly disturbed me. The Count was, in fact, a newcomer to the town of Littlefair, and I was the only resident with extensive business relations. Yes, there were bankers, investors, land proprietors, and contractors from all trades of life, however they were all natives to the region—considerably inept when it came to accepting strangers into their fold.

Nevertheless, the Count would receive monumental attention, so it was not question I get my foot in the door first. But before such a meeting could occur, I would need to ascertain the nature of the Brooks estate. I sent word at once upon waking, ensuring that Hitchens in his dictation included additional emphasis regarding the urgency of my concern, that it was of utmost importance Brooks and I secure a meeting that very same day at noon. While awaiting Hitchens' return, I tasked Caldwell with liability for securing the Count's interest in my own person and reputation. Still, I did not take Caldwell's behavior without warning. The prospect of successfully usurping whatever plans the Count may have and

recruiting him to my services posed a number of unknowns, a thing that unnerved me.

Caldwell was a buffoon, but not a gullible man, and since first witnessing the veritable rapture that had so quickly and effectively been installed, so much that it disarmed my associate of his faculties entirely—I did not take such realities so kindly, and do not consider myself an anxious man, but it set in me a worry that had begun to fester, and I found it difficult while awaiting Hitchens' return to steady my laboring mind, catching myself more than once pacing aimlessly throughout the manor and its rooms, so arrested at times that when I became alert to my own idle gawking at nothing, it was as though a wave of terror unlike any other had crashed upon me, and I looked about, shying away, nonsensical as it sounds, from the prying eyes of birds perched on branches outside the windows. It was amid the frustration following such occurrences in the suddenly domineering expanse of the manor that I opted for a smaller sitting room on the first floor, and having drifted off to sleep, I awoke with a terrible jolt in a feverish sweat so severe that I thought myself ill again, and believing hours had passed, called out for my butler, who had yet to return with word from Brooks.

Yet it was only a quarter till eleven, so I made for my bedroom, choosing the finest black suit from my mahogany armoire, and even though I next spent a considerable time dapping up my hair so that its curls would not run amuck, an appropriate top hat for the occasion. Upon making my way downstairs, Hitchens, having just arrived from seeing Brooks, came hurriedly to the bottom step, insisting that I have him prepare breakfast at once.

“What in God’s name for?” I shouted. “I’m to meet Brooks for lunch within the hour! Yes? Hitchens, I *am* to meet Brooks for lunch, and then this Count at one.”

“Yes, sir—oh, but my Duke you are becoming quite thin.”

“Then goddammit, prepare the finest breakfast imaginable! But not for me, Hitchens! Not for me!”

I was in too much hurry for that nonsense. Too much hurry indeed.

“Oh?”

“Invite some children if you like—but no more than two or three, and if you should indeed, then be surest, good man, that they are as upstanding citizens as the reputations of their parents should foretell. Or, should it happen to be so on the rarest of occasions, deeds in similar estimation to Caldwell and I, lest I should have to scold and beat them for the gross impropriety of their presence in this house!”

“Very good, sir. Anything else?”

“As you have correctly anticipated, Caldwell and I shall arrive for dinner this evening—any word from the man?”

“No, sir, however, Mr. Cullen Brooks does indeed send an invitation for brunch.”

I turned from the mirror where I had been attempting to straighten my bowtie and took the parchment from his grasp, finding Brooks’ signature, cerulean wax seal and its gilded embossment of his initial.

“Excellent. And *where* am I to be meeting him? It appears he has foolishly neglected to specify a destination.”

“Uh, the usual meeting place, sir. Perry Station.”

“I shall depart at once. But, uh, a brandy first, Hitchens, if you don’t mind.”

“Getting a head start for the evening’s tidings post-meeting the Count, sir?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“One brandy coming up, sir.”

“Make it a double!”

“Of course, sir.”

I nodded and dismissed Hitchens with a wave of my hand.

I made from the manor through a clandestine pocket door that I’d had installed for the purpose of hasty exits, if need be, and climbed into one of the luxury Model T Cabriolets in my possession, taking a moment to inspect whether the vehicle had been properly cleaned after my last venture through the countryside, and soon I discovered Hitchens had done quite the job—not one streak remained in sight, not one smear.

I headed towards Main St., planning to take Broadway all the way down. Perry Station lay on the riverfront, but time stayed ample for leisure, and I knew that Caldwell would likely use it for further preparation.

I’d had my eye on the Brooks’ estate for some time. Ever since laying eyes upon the grounds, in fact. A traditional three-story colonial-style with

identical smokestacks on each side, the architect's aesthetics of course commanded a particular envy arise in all those who gazed upon it—well, perhaps did they possess the faculties to appreciate its success over antiquity via a wondrous kind of perfection. Hitchens didn't agree, always sure to remind me of the estate's historical notorieties.

From the late 1870's until 1894, the grounds had been left to the ravages of nature. It lay not far up the river from Perry Station, behind a thicket of thin saplings that had overtaken a ten-acre span of lawn. The town of Littlefair had sprung up around the estate when it was in its prime, but property lines had been originally drawn with such curious proximity that one with even only referential knowledge of its days as a plantation would find themselves befuddled. In my research at city hall, I discovered there being few records pertaining to the property. I had only assumed it a matter of them having been destroyed just prior to or during Reconstruction—everyone local seems to have a story or two regarding the clandestine goings-on of the era, but I am admittedly hesitant to pursue townsfolk rumor, and the residents of Littlefair are no exception to gossip or hypocrisy, but these qualities are no match for their religious zeal. And I would later learn, following my investigation, that Brooks himself was keeping many documents regarding the estate—not only its deeds—under lock and key. There remained a strange, insular nature about them, those native to the town, and while perhaps not as terse and unforgiving as an Appalachian towards a *flatlander*, they recognized a border between the *outside* and *inside*, despite the fact that these parts could scarcely be called foothills.

To my left, a poorly dressed man peddled after his woman on a bicycle, riding circles around her in the street. She kept moving forward, her white dress and lace scarf fluttering, outstretched as though in someone's grasp. *His*, no doubt, the wind went to make the metaphor resoundingly evident, but alas, he could not see beyond his own stupid interest, refusing to give up after garnering only a quaint smile for his advances. Perhaps I had not been aggressive enough with Brooks. Though, he had never struck me as one appreciative of showmanship, let alone ornamented speech. No, it was a different kind of smoke he desired blown up his ass.

When I arrived to Perry Station, I silently damned Brooks for choosing such a public place instead of the comfort of his personal office and liquors, or even better, mine. The slender man was seated inside the café of the train station and appeared to be enjoying a tasty beverage by the dimpled expression on his face. The café was a favorite stop of his on the way to the bank on Main St. that he owned. He sat the teacup down into the gold-trimmed saucer and wiped his thick moustache with a handkerchief.

“Ah, you're earlier than I suspected. Can I get you anything for your troubles in meeting me here?”

“No troubles, Mr. Brooks—uh, but I would like a Brandy.”

“Of course.”

The man removed his top hat and motioned to the waiter as I lit a cigar, removing my leather gloves and attempting to settle into the rather uncomfortable,

lacquer-finished chair. There was no cushion. I looked around the café, but the only other seats were rod-iron benches out in the train station.

“I’ve been contemplating your offer for quite some time, Duke Masterson,” Mr. Brooks claimed, lighting up himself. The fragrance from his cigar’s smoke revealed that it’s inexpensive nature, and given by his expression after the first exhale, a stinging tear coming to his eye, a distinct bitterness. Indeed it was. I grimaced and took another drag from my own, attempting to cancel out the odor of his poor taste.

“And you have come to a decision, Mr. Brooks? About our arrangements?” I was very crisp, somewhat unanimated, but very direct. Mr. Brooks did not yet look up. He had not successfully lit his cigar on the first attempt and was nurturing its faint glow with another match.

“Now—now, Duke,” he said between puffs, “we’re getting ahead of ourselves.”

The overcast skies sent a pale, stabbing light into the murky, almost colorless café. I abruptly recognized my posture must have seemed very constrained, and that gave the appearance of being perhaps ill. The waiter brought my Brandy in a fine crystal glass.

“Leave the bottle,” I calmly insisted, draining the glass and pouring myself another as Brooks watched.

“Is everything alright, Bruce?” he asked, sounding moderately earnest.

“Fine . . . just fine.” I gave one of my grins, collecting my thoughts as I took another drink. “The Brooks estate is a very sought after property—for those in this business of restoration and development.”

“Indeed,” Brooks said. “I’ve been toiling with the multitudes of opportunities that seem to be springing forth. It can be quite intimidating, you see. Meeting with all these prospective parties.”

“Of course,” I agreed, taking another long drag from my cigar. Brooks seemed amused by his passive efforts to sully me into a position of inferiority. I held my composure for the time being, letting him continue to pontificate about the apparently arcane nature of his estate.

“It recently came to my attention through an associate that even Everett has been seeking my audience,” the man bragged.

“Everett?” I echoed. “The barge contractor?”

Brooks nodded, began stirring a cappuccino with a diminutive silver spoon that he’d taken from a pocket inside his overcoat. An ornate starlet embossed the widened tip of the handle, the shape a strange blue, or perhaps it was a gem. It kept my view too long for Brooks’ comfort, as he wiped the spoon clean with his white handkerchief and slipped both back into his coat pocket.

“He’s a ship-builder,” I continued, referring to Everett. “Why would he be interested in property renovations?”

“Allured to the promise of forthcoming new avenues, perhaps?” Brooks sighed, looking up at me for only the second time since I arrived. “Tell me, how



are your investments coming along? Spending long hours huddled over the ticker tape?”

His continuous tests of my alacrity for gauging the markets grew tiresome long ago, a thing he had, for a long time now, used as tool for prodding. Truly, his complete ignorance of my experience, public credentials of mine notwithstanding, could not be more astounding.

I had settled into my livelihood of restoration. *Settled into*. Not originated. Earlier in life, I found my first successes with investments in the locomotive boom. This occurred shortly after the completion of the transcontinental railway, and coupled with befriending several assets in the oil business, financial wealth and commerce, I flourished there as well. My current investments concerned Mr. Ford’s automobile creations.

In addition to these little restoration projects, I concerned myself with ongoing property lines negotiations in Littlefair. It did not require too much discussion to sway my clients to acquire more property, thus expanding the breadth of the city and ensuring its owners remained among friends—friends who would no doubt in the future seek to acquire my particular set of skills for beautification. Oh, Hitchens was incessantly on and on about it, my grandiose delusions for nepotism. But we weren’t the slightest bit related, I’d argued, though he wouldn’t budge from his own pedestal of superiority, having professed himself heir-apparent to some clandestine bloodline, claiming his service as butler to be a hobby on par with my acquisitions. Preposterous! He was no Caldwell, I admit, but only slightly less the buffoon than Brooks. And my aims for the town

were no mere hobby. I wanted to restore the historical portions to their former prestige, yes, but in my acquisitions, I aspired to pave way for the new, the encroaching doom of the impoverished and their plight that had been tossed into the laps of the wealthy serving as, in my mind, the foremost obstacle in the path of my ambitions.

It was a mining town—Littlefair—but the well had long run dry. Still, the people clung to their own dreams of striking it rich once again, refusing to leave despite the poor wages offered by their greedy hosts. Gunderson was his name—the solitary hold-out on a bid to sell the jointly-owned coal mine beneath the town to a more respectable firm by the name of Oaks and Saff. It would do well to clear the hope-ravenous multitudes from their shanty homes and run-down, dreadfully horrific pubs and illegal brothels. Though there *would* be stubborn ones among their numbers, too, I realized, an effortless bribe could work wonders, save for those I came across who had intoxicated themselves with a nostalgia for the plight of the meager miner, but I was no stranger to more aggressive means.

For example, the majority of the miners' properties had been secured via a contract loan in which a taxed portion of their weekly earnings paid the mortgage on their housing. Regardless of the status of the loan, I would call on Brooks to foreclose on these individuals, thus nullifying their work contracts, and if they did not depart at that point, we would then send the authorities. It was a hassle, I'll admit, generated a great deal of friction between Brooks and Gunderson, but a pair of corrupt men's strife and the shattering of some poor sod's lusting dream of

wealth, all in exchange for the securing of Littlefair's future, soothed whatever pains such methods aroused.

"The stocks are experiencing a slow but steady climb," I gave to Brooks, seeing his efforts to stir some valuable crumb from my faculties had not yet waned. "Why, it's only up from here."

"Steam locomotives, motorized carriages—do you truly see all this industry surpassing its current state? Seems to me that society has reached a plateau."

It seemed to me that Mr. Brooks was stalling, avoiding my concerns in regard to his decision. And there was this Count afoot. I am known to be a patient man, but only for a certain measure of time. Even at that, my time is spent wisely. A morning filled with Brooks' garrulous nonsense was not something I had prepared to stomach. "Suffer idle chatter over tea *only* for gold," my mother used to say.

I took another sip of my Brandy, reminding myself of Brooks' tendency to genuinely steer off track, or fixate.

"Mr. Brooks, I agreed to your audience only on the matter of your estate, and our conversation seems to be suffering the usual extended detour. Now, I understand that this must be a challenging decision to make, especially for a man who labors in matters requiring such accuracy and dutifulness. Therefore, I can express some understanding towards the delay. But, if I may be so earnest, since our first discourse on the affair nearly two months ago, you have returned nothing substantial to me. Now, please bear in mind that during this time, I've turned

away several lucrative deals in waiting for your decision concerning my contractual offer. You may not be aware of it, but this rather unbecoming of me. I anticipate a couple days as the typical response time. In some special cases, a week. What I am saying to you now, Mr. Brooks, is that you should consider your estate *exceedingly* special—so special in fact that the matter of its restoration has warranted an unprecedented degree of patience, on my part. Look around you. Look at these folk. Mind the expert quality of your chair, the richness of your drink. Such things were impossible, a mere two years ago.

“The town is in a boom right now, Mr. Brooks, but not only for residential properties. Commerce. Industry. Surely the reasons why are as plain to you as the plainness of your jacket. An interesting strategy, I must say, but everyone here knows who you are, just as they recognize me—understand why it is that this establishment even stands where it does. Now, as I have stated before, it is important to me that the historicity of the Brooks estate be preserved and exemplified in this time of change. It served as the foundation of this town at one time. My contract is simple: restoration and reinterpretation of the property lines, which—whether you do or not—is something I take very seriously. But if you’ve no plans to advance the nature of the matter any further, wishing instead to discuss the progress of our species, then I shall take my leave of you.”

“When we as a people conquer Death itself, society wilt hath only begun ascension to the highest throne!” someone interrupted, the voice singing from behind.

I turned only to behold a man as ridiculous as his manner of speaking, bearing it in my mind with such excruciating clarity that he was the Count.

On approach, the tamping of his black cane landed so firmly I believed it would snap. The pommel curved, a hanger, the tip a bit broader, bestowing a very phallic shape, a thing I'd only first noticed for its gold sheen, same as his cufflinks and belt buckle—and there on his breast, several medals and ribbons that giving no appearance of military adoration, award, or significance of rank, I could only presume to be furnishings he'd contrived for himself. A black cape, not one shade away from magenta on the inside, the collars and borders of his suit this same color, and lined with absurd golden embroideries and tassels adorned his broad, powerful frame, and the top hat, too tall to resemble customary proportion, and far more resembling of the male sex than his cane, he removed to reveal a gleaming mat of jet hair parted down the middle, yet from its crease it not only fell in a wash of heavy pomade, but on each side, rose and fell again, a ridiculous, undulating tide. His mustache mimicked this fashion, reaching out from the sides of his face, and his beard—sharp, stabbing down from under his bottom lip and chin like a dagger. Atop his hawkish nose, a pair of bulging blue eyes filled with mischief, and when he grinned his lips curled over a set of teeth one might esteem as porcelain. Though whether it was drink that had granted his cheeks such rosy quality, I couldn't tell, and in fact, could muster no further thought upon the matter, for some air about him had taken my heart, bringing it near to leaping from my chest, and with such vivaciousness a heat of liveliness inexplicably mixed with terrible anxiety and rage coursed throughout my body,

my hands going numb, turning. Yes, this could be none other than the Count Herrdontilus Fhloppenswatch.

I felt a greater wash of terror come over me, as absurd as he completely was. By every account this man was preposterous—a complete farce of stupefaction so poorly concealed by appearance. He couldn't be serious, although it was just that in the manner he stood, in the persistent, challenging expression—no, he was very serious. Perhaps therein lay my terror—his unflinching confidence and glee to see those before him arrested by simultaneous fear, revulsion, and adoration. I felt too, that my uneasiness was a product of Caldwell's insecurities, his prophetic manner of speaking about this Count, yet as my efforts to resist his visage increased, so did it seem to extend much farther than what I could see, thus more deeply permeating my inner senses and whittling away at my resolve. There came a push in me, then a pull, something tugging at my metaphysical substances. Yes, he was magnetic, this Count. Transcendental. I desired to hear him speak again, and becoming drenched now in sweat, I barely gained control of my faculties.

Count Herrdontilus Fhloppenswatch—what a terrible, terrible creature.

*φ.12*

“It's not The Hero's Journey,” I say to Mark, “or the Heroine's.”

“There's one for the heroine?” he calls back.

“Yeah,” I quip. “They're different.”

“Well, of course.”

The silence tells me I need to explain, but I click back over to our Discord server to make sure the call is still active.

“Sorry,” I say, “was finishing up an email.”

“No problem.”

“It’s similar,” I begin, a diagram already in front of me, “but you begin with a separation from the feminine—”

“Well, you’ve got that with the house. The isolation. Well, if she *was* alone.”

“*They*. And they *were*.”

“But you said—”

“I know what I said. Bone fragments don’t tell us everything, you know that. Neither do computers.”

“So when did you start thinking of them that way? Aren’t there enough anomalies?”

“That’s part of the reason,” I say, ignoring the tone. “But regardless, the story doesn’t follow either structure. Hero, or heroine. It’s something else.”

“Something older?”

“Ha-ha, funny.”

“Something newer.”

“Wouldn’t *that* be something.”

“It really would.”

“And we’d never be allowed to talk about it.”

“Or live,” Mark adds.

“You’re probably right,” I sigh, knowing he is absolutely right.

“So,” he continues, after some silence, “something new? Like, the queer hero’s journey?”

“No, that’s too derivative.”

“Wouldn’t it be, regardless?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean like, you’ll find a pattern because you’re looking for specific patterns.”

“I’m not looking for patterns.”

“Of course you are.”

“The archaeologists and anthropologists are looking for patterns. The scientists doing radiometric and sedimentary dating analyses are looking for patterns.”

“Your entire education is derived from long-held patterns of established reasoning. Your application of that knowledge and reasoning has been habituated through a dialogic process of trial and error—under the supervision of your peers. How are you not looking for patterns?”

“Because I’m not looking for patterns.”

“Okay,” Mark says, “Occam’s Razor.”

“Shoot.”

“It’s a hoax. The entire site.”

“The best minds have ruled that out. Not a single bit of disturbance to any of the strata, above or below.”

“Yeah, but how far?”

“What?” I ask after some time, when he’d repeated the question with my name.

“How far did the survey extend?”



“I don’t know that,” I snap, but cooling myself, I readjust my mic and say, “I mean I didn’t ask anyone.”

“Perhaps you should.”

“You’re too rational,” I finish, adding, “And linear.”

“Not linear. I mean, yeah, in a sense, it would seem that way at a first glance.”

I pause. “So, what, the entire site’s temporally sublimated?” I cup my hand over the microphone, giving the tent where I’m working a quick look around to make sure no one’s nearby, but I already know that none of the networks on-site are as secure as we’ve been assured. At least, they wouldn’t have insisted on our research having full autonomy if *someone* wasn’t watching. I ask Mark if he’s discussed his theory with anyone else.

“It was just an idea,” he assures.

“None of the other sites indicate slippage beyond the borders of the object.”

“Check the original survey team’s field sample reports. I’ll be curious to know if they extend beyond ten meters.”

He already knows they don’t, given his tone.

It’s late, but the site maintains an even greater degree of armed security at night, which in no way suggests a successful incursion of the site during the day. Frankly, I’d much rather do this kind of reconnaissance during a sandstorm, but here in 2034, sandstorms have yet to make do on the kind of promise of the coming decade’s normalized, unparalleled catastrophes, where Baghdad, along with many other cities in the Middle East, find themselves joining the burial sands of old Egypt and Babylon. I begin to wonder if it was all ironic—Lydia’s presence here. It’s difficult to even entertain, given what it would mean.

***φ .13***

*Our histories are inseparable from one another, be they devoured by time or so intrenched in others that we cannot tell them apart.*

—Lydia (year unknown)

I was overcome by a feeling of being swallowed in a novel way, here in the desert. That my own life must be such a small thing to have all these events on Earth swirling around, concealing me with a vastness I could not comprehend. Lydia felt the same, in the time from which they traveled to be here alone in the distant past. I thought it was an accident, at first.

I talked these enormities over with Mark. Through the archaic computers we're using, I could hear him smirking.

"My husband thinks doom is funny."

"I do," he blips.

"Regardless of whether it is personal or universal."

"Wait, are you writing this down?"

"Of course I'm writing it down. It's part of the record I'm leaving."

The call enters silence. Some scratches on the other end signal his shuffling.

"You're serious?"

"Why not?" I ask. "What more harm could it do at this point."

"It isn't protocol—"

"Is that all you think about?"

He knows this is an argument in which the juice isn't worth the squeeze, but also that there happens to be no juice and nothing to squeeze.

"It's just all your thoughts?"

"Mostly," I answer, but he's actually interested, for once. "There's some data points in there too."

"Like what?"

"Well," I sigh, more out of reflex, but it's something I do that makes people concerned I am troubled. "I wanted to leave something that tried to explain what happened. You know, like a timeline."

"And you said *I'm* too linear. That was a joke, Aek."

"I know."

"So . . . a timeline."

"Yeah."

I decide to start with what I have at the beginning—some context.

"In a future far nearer than one would imagine," I begin, sounding more monotonous than I want, "time travel is invented to thwart runaway planetary heating. But we don't bother with sending people back in time to pose as scientists, or politicians, or prophets. Well, we don't anymore. No, after exhausting ourselves with the whims of elites traveling to the near and distant past, recalibration of the Earth's nominal temperature range needed for reconstitution of the biosphere became the primary function for the technology. But in addition to sending things backward, our temporal doorways also bring things forward. Namely, oxygen."

"I like it," Mark says.

“It feels a little sticky.”

“No, it’s good. Is there more?”

“Yes.”

“Read it to me.”

“I haven’t finished that part yet, about how we set up a mining operation—oh, you know, I hate calling it that. We’re harvesting air from the past.”

“Not only air—”

“Mostly. We’re mostly harvesting air—”

“And sending garbage almost four billion years back—”

“Bombarding! I need that—”

“The bombardment?”

“No, we’re bombarding the past with the future’s mistakes.”

“Due to the mistakes of the past.”

“It’s a choice.”

“It’s survival. At least, that’s what we told ourselves before the Accretion—”

“I’m getting to that part,” I say. “So, I *do* spend some time—maybe a little too much time—talking about all the bureaucracy and regulating of the networks once the anomalies begin to show up, but it starts with the TCN.”

“Okay,” Mark says.

“Okay. ‘Indeed, early 21<sup>st</sup> century climate models severely underestimated the initiatives required to not only halt, but reverse runaway warming. In their failure of imagination and outright denial, runaway mechanisms such as ocean acidification had already exceeded critical thresholds in which any meaningful actions would have

produced desirable effects. It was this type of overshoot—runaway mechanisms—that activated further feedback loops that in turn, activated more runaway mechanisms. For instance, in the year 2028, a blue-ocean event occurred in the arctic. Without any ice to reflect the immense amount of energy produced by the sun, the disruption of ocean currents exacerbated warming trends exponentially, leading to an accelerating of more warming and thus climate destabilization. By 2032, the mid-century 2°C threshold that world governments had been told they should work to mitigate, an effort that according to the best models for intervention at the time had forecast as possible, regardless of its likelihood, had already been crossed.

“Needless to say, what scientists had predicted in terms of catastrophic weather events began had already started. Drought and flood created lower-than-anticipated crop yields, which in turn led to massive food shortages. With billions experiencing malnutrition, mass exoduses from food insecure deserts overwhelmed first-world nations. Governments collapsed. Borders closed. I remember the first time I watched the archived footage of welling masses of people collapsing the checkpoints between Germany and France—”

“Do you think *footage* is the right word?” Mark asks.

“Hmm, yeah, probably not,” I agree, “but I imagine there are plenty of words in here that aren’t exactly right.”

“What’s the correlation?”

I pause, unable to recall whether we had gotten that far in our discussion of Lydia’s pseudo-Victorian horror novel—a term I had given it.

“The Count takes control of the town through the church. The Duke has to stop him. It culminates in a delirious orgy of mind-rending excess and violence.”

“Of course it does.”

“Well, that’s the correlation.”

“Yes,” Mark replies, softer than ever, “I was there.”

I’d forgotten somehow. I don’t know how, but he knew, and there wasn’t any hiding it. I felt so ashamed I thought it might be better to continue, being an insensitive asshole, since that was what he’d been so desperate to make of me here lately, but then I considered that I shouldn’t get what I wanted. That would also break a norm between us.

“I didn’t forget,” I lied, the most normal thing about us, choosing to try and mend something by asking why he had decided not to erase it.

“You know why.”

“People get better. You know that too.”

“I don’t want to get better because of a machine. We’re all headed to the same place—the Accretion Point—”

“You only think that because you don’t have any faith in what we’re doing—what I’m doing.”

“Lydia fucked us. She got depressed and went crazy after going back in time so much. There’s no fixing everything she decided to destroy on purpose.”

“I don’t believe that!”

“It doesn’t matter what you believe,” Marks says, chuckling after. “Isn’t that *your* line? *It doesn’t matter what you believe. It’s science.* Or hey, maybe a game. All one stupid fucking game. You ever think about that?”

“Fuck you, Mark,” I say, and I disconnect.

## CHAPTER VI: PERMUTATION—METALOGUE TERRA: LYDIA'S URN

### L.1.0

I have taken the liberty of preserving Lydia's work here as part of this permanent record, but as the collection of poems bears no comprehensive title under which the works fall, I feel it a misstep on my part to do so. But if I were to choose a title, it would likely be taken from the poem, *The Mutual Benefits of Keeping Pets*, for, in a sense, I have felt like one myself, these past weeks, sniffing along, pursuing various trails to their ends.

And, in a way, I too feel *kept*, as in, "secure," or "safe," to the extent where such is possible, and I admit a gratitude in that, given the fraught nature of this work, the paths along its assembly. And I feel I must note, too, the frailty of my organizing here, for this text I fear does not have an official beginning, middle, or end, and I don't know if Lydia wished for what I've selected as the final poem to appear as part of the work at all, if it is something solitary and on its own that perhaps she did not know what to do with, had discarded, or meant as part of another project I've yet to discover here in the ruin of time.



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## The Next Cataclysm

i.

soon the sun will crucify her shell  
cracked and bathing blistering light  
radiant, she will glass the earth, the moon  
the world will halt on a thread, wind the other way  
miles of ocean will breathe over the land  
that plain of rot and waste  
    all is dust, unraptured filth  
a blinding bliss a binding birth  
    we were wanted a while, we were not wanted

ii.

what was your life, your breath, before I knew you?  
did you take as much from others as you did from me?  
I have stayed in the whispers you left, the tiny clues buried,  
the shadows of your reaping, your wake, eddies in my flesh.  
I'm forever waiting for hands, for prying fingers to intrude  
—a rancid thing I can't be rid of, and seem to want—  
I ask if that makes me a monster, too. Does it?  
You do not answer me, you will not, because I forbid it  
strike from my calloused mind the sound of your cooling  
your voice and blistering tongue seeking to sooth with fire.  
I do not need them. Your words. I am a lamp, singeing myself.

iii.

Ready for the next Fall, Adam's fire raging rush blustered up swelled veins—  
his soul was Atlantis, falling into the sea, and Pompeii, a heart  
buried under pumice flame and magma belched from the umbral  
a din a sin an anaphylactic shocking grin masked your face  
here comes Babylon new and fresh and sleek and turned  
we turned the car wheeled you fell asleep at the wheel  
I fell asleep at the wheel—of my mind—again, we spun, we swelled  
we churned in a spume of fear, then indifference, you so very keen  
and passionate for silence, for lack of acknowledgement, for norms—  
I tried to reach you, I grasped for air, I didn't care, I didn't know  
it was the end of the world, I nearly died for you, a phantom,  
I did die, when you erupted, when you nearly died for nothing,  
you didn't care, the dead don't care  
Dude, I'm over it, I got over it and grew up,

just like you told me to, dude, I'm not your dude,  
man, not a bro, man, it's just an apocalypse  
iv.

grandfather's chest heaved as he died  
under the wane of machines and the tyranny of flesh  
was his soul bursting to be free, or did it hold  
fast to his bones and marrow, raging  
the last ebbs of life in them resplendent  
or ossified, something irrevocable  
refusing to let go, come out of them  
ten hours or more, he wheezed, shivering  
must have wanted to stay, fighting like that  
how he'd hit himself on the head, tearful  
when speaking of my grandmother falling  
how he'd been unable to help her stand  
everyone cried

I did not. Could not.  
am I more human now?

v.  
her orange skin, wax paper, and veins black  
it won't be long now, my mother said  
caressing the head of her own, a living corpse  
silent, sleeping, or maybe, already gone

vi.  
he came into the school with two rifles, two shotguns  
and a .22 caliber pistol  
emptied the clip into the crowd  
three died, another paralyzed from the waist down  
Lynn Worsham wrote about us, that December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1997,  
but I read the essay in October, thirty years later.  
*This might be weird for you*, the professor said.  
Without asking, she wrote and published my story—what I heard,  
what I saw, what I remembered—nothing in the reading,  
not the tears, blood, the backpacks still strewn in the lobby  
where the prayer circle had been gathered,  
the same place I would have been,  
had I decided to go that morning,  
all of us frantic, sealed in our classrooms I don't know how long  
all of the frantic, the blue lights, the wailing

the gymnasium, all of us, herded like rats,  
quiet, waiting, loud, wailing,  
my mother, stark white and coming from a storm,  
to pry me from that trap, that mouth, her lips pursed  
she hugged me, sought to ease me, end my fear—a rarity,  
and the days after, I remember my teachers,  
the grim, the stillness

vii.

as a child, I was conditioned to accept unacceptable violences  
animal suffering, human suffering, animal violence, human violence  
violence on tv, violence at home, suffering in me, suffering in—  
God was a maniac. an angry adolescent who had already planned it  
letting far fewer people into heaven than he had made for hell.  
what a scheme, though, the animals escaping.  
they did not go to heaven. they did not go to hell.  
the animals were here to eat. to be eaten. I wanted to escape  
an animal, but I did not want to be eaten. Hell was a hungry mouth  
and God was always feeding, but it was waiting for its final meal  
after the rapture. the big dish, the whole pie.  
because it pleased Him to do so, God allowed humans to eat  
the animals and one another. the reprobates and even the elect.  
because while all things were beneath Him, none suffered enough.  
something needed to be filled. making takes too much out

viii.

i do not know he is going to rape me, but he does.  
he bends me first.  
he pulls my arm back, keeps his hand on the back of my neck.  
he says i knew what i came there for.  
he says it like it is fuel, to set his whispers on fire .  
he talks about my body. my muscles. my wrists held. my throat.  
he says i am such a strong man.  
he says it like a joke.  
i am not. i did not want to hear anything. i wanted to leave.  
he says he feels bad.  
i think it is another joke.  
he insists on a shower. it is another trick.  
he does not want me to leave. he wants inside again.  
he does not hear the word *no*.  
he says how bad he feels. the water burns.  
i burn where he goes as he pleases.

he does not hear *no*.  
he does not hear *stop*.  
he says how bad he feels, that he feels he has ruined everything.  
i insist he hasn't, because i know he doesn't want me to leave.  
i am beginning to believe i will die there.  
he has nothing in his eyes.  
his jaw is working. he apologizes again.  
he insists on giving me a shower.  
he doesn't want everything ruined.  
he urinates on me in the shower.  
he mourns my leaving.  
he is unsure of letting it happen. my leaving.  
he is afraid i will not return.  
his eyes are like my father's when cutting off the heads of rabbits,  
animals he didn't love, eyes with a spark, like when beating my brothers and I,  
whom he claimed to love, eyes when beating his dog, with a chain,  
whom he loved more than us.  
his eyes are the same. empty and ready,  
to kill, to feed with slaughter. the same as my father when he lied,  
when he told our neighbor he had not seen their dog, the one he'd shot  
and buried already, because it had come back for another chicken.  
to survive, i tell lie after lie.  
the best lies I have ever told.

ix.  
at the clinic, it is their job  
to kindly tell people they have hiv  
to hold space for the end of the world  
to regulate, to keep the animal in its cage  
to keep it from destroying everything  
they are just doing their job  
delaying catastrophe for another minute, another hour  
the setting in of its horrors to the bones, the soul  
be aware that they are exhausted kindness  
they do not know the difference  
between kindness and clinical routine  
you don't have to, but you can hate them anyway  
hate how they see you  
how they speak to you  
a stupid little lamb whose slit throat  
will not suture with words  
let alone those of insincere cattle

I want to pull on the tag  
bring their ear to my mouth and scream  
scream my blood into their hollows

x.  
it will come again  
you will live  
you made it, survivor  
congratulations  
here's a prize—a bright blue ribbon  
get it? we thought you would  
that you would appreciate it  
now, let's go over the list  
make sure everything's in order  
so when it happens again, you're ready  
you know what to do, we know  
but just in case, here's the protocol  
the order, and we want to see you in person  
or we can't get you what you need  
understand?

## Cycle

My mother shares her latest cleaning exploits  
while giving dad honorable mentions  
—climbing into the attic to bring down all *the stuff*—  
she means Christmas decorations, a couple of her mom’s old lamps,  
keepsakes of ours (her *sons*, including me)  
junk I can’t imagine—our past.

When I come to visit, I can go through everything, see what I want  
school papers, magazines, old drawings of mine, stories I’ve written.  
If I don’t want them, she can just burn them, she guesses,  
but under the cheer is a match already striking in her throat.  
throw some gas on it—tell her “son” is inappropriate  
tell her why

Mom doesn’t notice the sound in her voice,  
the reason—why things *have* to be burned,  
as if simply discarding things risks someone else being given a chance  
to see another person’s unwanted history, have reckless thoughts,  
let alone have them, save them

I share this habit —throwing things away—large masses,  
my own life set to fire, so much that now I’ve come to lack  
memorabilia, old friends, and even versions of myself  
In notebooks, I’ve meant to write over him.  
In deleted texts and blocked messages,  
I’ve tried to become insulated from his flammable spark  
but I’m curious what I share—what bond, what word, or dream—  
is he really going, when upon waking from terrors, alone, I shake  
aching to forget the place in which I burned, but didn’t die?  
Was it me? Am I him?

I locked myself in my room every day.  
The one on the knob didn’t work, couldn’t keep things at bay.  
After heavy debate, dad installed a brass barrel bolt, so I could be alone  
away from the loud, the chaos—to draw, and write, and live.

Those who seek to keep order have a penchant for fire.  
So do those made of embers.

## Oracle

If God didn't want us  
he wouldn't have made us.  
I know the sting of your nails  
the rust, the blood in the eyes  
the blunt of the cross, the cup  
its senseless wealth spilling over  
a golden seam, the knives of drinkers  
devout, slipped with malice in the spine.

If the world didn't want us,  
like a wet dog, it would shake us off.  
Or the forests would grow without stopping  
reaching to choke us out with root and vine  
the hills and mountains a maddened mind  
cracking, groaning, folding as fine fingers  
clasped in prayer to soothe and shut out  
the defiant cry of the deviant, our rage.



## Play

i.

We drove to Ballard County every other Sunday after sermon.  
We took extra clothes to change into, so we wouldn't dirty the good ones.  
Cause we had to go back, for evening service, and we got so filthy,  
both my brothers and I, and my cousin too, who always had better clothes  
better toys like John Deere tractors and trucks. Not like my uncle's,  
or grandfather's, but newer, brand new, and we got them dirty,  
chipped the paint. Broke a wheel. And while washing the toys  
holding them under a hydrant after whipping my cousin,  
my uncle said, "All y'all know how to do is break shit,"  
and "I oughtta beat the shit out of y'all, too."

ii.

We *did* sometimes break our toys, the three of us,  
because we played too hard, like mom said not to,  
and dad had yelled it too, and they didn't whip us for it,  
but we weren't minding, even though we said "yes sir"  
and "yes ma'am" every time they called for us,  
and "no sir" and "no ma'am" whenever it was needed,  
and "May I please?" when we wanted something,  
anything at all, and "May I be excused?"  
to leave the dinner table, to go to bed,  
and it stayed that way for everything, that kind of speaking,  
because we weren't minding, like my cousin,  
who didn't talk like that, because whipping was enough.

iii.

Dad was loud when he told us stories about growing up,  
but so was mom, and she sometimes added tears and screaming,  
because no one was listening.  
She told most of them when dad was at work,  
or had stayed home from church. On the way,  
she would swing at whoever sat beside her up front,  
spitting that we didn't mind or care about God,  
that we didn't have a lick of sense. I didn't.  
I just wanted her to mind the road.  
Because I was sure we could wreck, and God wouldn't stop it.

## Rabbits

i.

There are times when I want to account for the animals.  
Not because there were so many. Their deaths excited.  
Strung up with twine by their little ankles, their eyes big,  
bloodshot, and peeling the lids back. We laughed at the thrashing,  
my brothers and I, at their little hearts pumping as we rubbed  
their bellies soft and receiving our assurances  
it would be over fast, because Dad was strong and quick  
could sever their heads in a single stroke,  
and if not, certainly two. I need an answer for our wonder  
at the bright and thick blood splashing the ground,  
the earth sticky and stained by years of kill,  
for the sopping into their fur, the dripping from their bare meat  
the skin pulled free like a shirt. I want to know why dad urged joy,  
showing each pillowy organ with red slicked fingers and naming,  
each one, cutting with his knife to reveal all their innards,  
feeding them and the writhing gray guts to his drooling dogs.

ii.

When we returned from grandfather's pond,  
the catfish hung by hooks through their gills.  
Dad would sweat in the summer Saturday sun,  
teeth bared and arm bulging with strain to tear their skin  
to wrench it free with pliers. How he would swear  
when their flesh ripped instead of cleaning in a strip,  
their mouths working, tails dry and sticky in the heat  
turning with an agony like rabbits, but not the same,  
because catfish weren't brought inside to play and pet,  
neither were chickens, whom my mother would slaughter  
once their eggs came few, just like she had been taught.

iii.

"Y'all had to eat, and we didn't always have money for meat,"  
mom tells me, when I ask her about suffering. She says little else  
because she has learned by now I don't take Lamb's blood  
as an answer for anything. Why must I keep bringing it up, their deaths?  
She was raised like that. The animals had good lives. They were put here for us.  
Us *boys* never went hungry. She says how expensive meat is these days.

I agree.

## Constant Paranoia Takes Some Discipline

In observance of pity from those who walk hallowed ground  
—my recalcitrance notwithstanding—  
consider the stakes:

Blood-viraled and brittle boned  
the patient money, mill—my flesh.  
resilience                      questionable  
patience                         kindling.

Ward your grief and spill the news, nurse                      I already know

—positive—

*though they say*

“reactive”

but mind the gap  
the difference between our lived                      plentiful pour.

From where I stand, not even a century of empathy  
could cleanse the rot from these doors.

Your consolation                      unwanted  
Your pity                                 insufficient

Save your sympathies                      I already knew.

I'd just as well die-in laughing on St. Patrick's synagogue floor,  
than feign space for one clinician's

single, gutted tear.

Save the machines, tally-keeper,  
no need for the chants, the ritual rants.  
I've had the lungs of my soul masked up for years,  
which is not to say *immune*  
from being reduced                      or spared

the din of data and sanitized slang.

I haven't ever been to NYC, and I haven't been to church in years

but you best believe I'm gonna act up,  
top with Jeremiad's fire when it suits me,  
bury the numbers high, and rounding low with a gasp  
even as I still hear God in my doubts  
feel dad in my veins,  
in the gush of blood breaking my heart  
as I look for myself in the crowd,  
in the supermarket of fear, flags, labels, and cries  
  
wondering what to make of all this, absence  
  
this learning that people can't care about you  
while they care about you,  
  
that they can care about you  
while not caring about you.  
  
That it is something deeper than a job, than a history,  
  
to rinse and repeat  
  
this strange centrifuge.

## Suffer the Rifle

Father took us hunting  
sometimes to grandfather's land  
—mom's dad, not his—  
other times across the street,  
I always hated waiting, being stirred from my nest.

We warmed by a wood stove  
not enjoying a furnace for years  
but better than cinderblock walls  
the fiberglass roof over our beds.

Put me back in my place, dad  
it's too early for death  
the coveralls weigh too heavy  
and the gun doesn't fit.

I see squirrels now, always skinned, submerged  
cleaned in the cloudy water of a gallon bucket  
—bulging eyes big, pink flesh—  
I won't mention what I see when I see a deer,  
rabbits, pigs, chickens, fish  
tough meat, father spitting pellets on a plate  
he hates that word, *father*, because it's meant for God  
should be saved for *Him*, I didn't mean it  
he always said he didn't mean to  
never saw the wound, couldn't stand its sight  
which was not the same as the invisible ones  
all the little injuries he couldn't claim, won't help.

**they didn't say**

how to weather their screaming  
how to wake without screaming  
buckle up buttercup—

what to say when they wanted answers  
    why you threw gasoline on their fire when they told you not to  
        why you would do it you knew it was always burning—

how to tell what is made of gasoline  
    the walls are made of gasoline  
        your breath is made of gasoline

what to say at all  
    when they tell you it's time to go,  
        when they burn your clothes,  
            when they let your things rot outside  
                when it's all made of—

how to be ready  
    for the rage and fear  
        you would never be ready  
            —what to do to weather the fear to reign the  
                fear—

    where to park your car for sleeping  
        —how to sleep when—

you will be exploited and denied a bed  
    they will approve  
        you will not know how to say  
            be quiet because you need the money the money the money  
                for your plan, for others' plans

you would need a plan  
    you should have already had a plan  
        you should have had a better plan  
            you should have known about their plans

—the rage and gasoline—

the ones who *love* you will ask you to pay

to sleep

to be safe and serene

they will want you to pay them

they will want you to pay them

you deserve to fucking pay

—you had better believe they want you  
dead—

where you should go when you are waiting,

when *brother* means nothing,

when *friend* means *negotiate*,

when they keep changing the agreement,

when they *can't swing it*, and you don't know where to go,

when you become a charity—

that when they change, you don't know who they are anymore

that when you change, you don't know who you are anymore

that seconds are inflammable but years are fast gas

that when you don't know—

how to know

how to survive

when to run

how to give your body safety after giving it for safety

how to behave when they wake you for more and can't hear *no*

how to say *no*

how to know the things they said are wrong

—who you are isn't wrong—

that it wasn't God's plan, it was theirs

that they shouldn't have thought of children as—

that they might never know you and be fine with that

that there would be so much more

—but none like theirs—

that the rage when the rage is the rage,

that you're mad octane in a cradle of fire,  
no visibility for the fume,

—a mystery how you made it—  
—a miracle to still be making it—

that you didn't have it better than most you aren't choosing to remember it that way it happened  
that way and

— worse —

right, that your words aren't renewable like their myths, you are

they clutched the flame first,

—you aren't bad or ungrateful—

you aren't—  
it's okay, you were trying to make it,

—being lost is okay—  
—no one is ever late—

you are loved  
you deserve to be loved  
love yourself no matter what

no one told us  
why did no one tell us



because it's so obvious  
why someone didn't tell us

## They Did Say

“don’t make your brother look bad”

“I oughtta whip you till you can’t walk straight”

“don’t cross your legs that way”

“don’t embarrass me”

“don’t disappoint me”

“you should be ashamed”

“I’m sorry I whipped you like that

but when you make me so mad  
I just can’t help it.”

“Watch out for queers. They are everywhere.”

“I know we had a bad morning

but you should have done better”

“they should take them all out back and shoot them—

they all need a bullet”

“when are you going to do something with your life”

“are you going to start talking different now?”

“we left you alone with your uncle once”

“I don’t agree with it, but it’s okay, I’ve known for years.”

“you need to come and get everything you want,  
because I’m going to throw it all  
away.”

“you’re living in sin”

**“YOU KNOW WHAT YOU CAME HERE  
FOR.”**

“we need you to come in for your results”

“my nurse is training and will be observing this part of the  
process, is that ok?”

“your test came back reactive”

“you have a lot to look forward to  
you still have a lot of life to live”

“would you like to join a support group”

“what’s your status”

“are you negative”

“I should have asked beforehand. I’m usually more careful.”

“it’s not the issue for me”

“it’s an issue for me”

“I feel I need to educate myself  
before moving forward”

“You’re cool but I ain’t tryin to catch no disease.”

“what’s that medication for?”

“have you missed any doses?”

“how did you catch it?”

“why weren’t you on PrEP?”

## Fit

dumbbells ab wheel core sliders bands  
yoga mat yoga block yoga socks yoga spandex  
knee brace pull-up bar ankle brace sprain  
epsom salt rubbing alcohol pre-workout shake  
bounce sweat picture-perfect BMI image filter  
you need this you need them sweat image filter  
love handles poof belly burn it up hold it down

do your situps drink your water clean your face heal your mind  
do the dishes do the laundry clean your room read a book  
take your pills for your blood take your pills keep it clean  
wake up early take your pill take a shower cholesterol  
take a photo scroll the apps take a photo take a photo  
know your status no your status leave your status blank  
take a photo take a photo take a photo delete 'em all

doctor visit doctor mock doctor snob doctor whatever  
swallow swallow swallow swallow swallow  
words pills assurances illusions grief panic lies  
schedule the meeting answer the phone listen to the voicemail  
do another set a few more reps another set this is healthy  
manage it not too much manage it not too much  
do a set wait a minute do a set wait a minute  
now run run a little more you ran too much try some stairs  
drink some water so much sweating drink some water don't be embarrassed  
you better swallow you better take your pill don't forget your pill drink that water  
get your pill get your pill take your pill don't forget  
go to the gym to the gym you better get fit you stupid shit  
you're gonna die gonna die gonna die you fucking bag of—  
look at this trash better clean you better clean and fucking listen  
better look me in the eye when I'm talking to your ass,  
better believe I'm gonna be checkin on you in a minute  
no a second no now now now now do it now  
do it now don't forget  
do it now don't forget

don't feel bad this is fine don't panic this is fine  
you know you know you know you remember?  
what happens what happens  
if you forget don't forget sometimes you forget?



## Heavy

There's a part of me that wants to die.  
And believing the emotional energy one transmits returns,  
I've reached the logical conclusion no one wants me,  
or will be with me  
since I don't want myself.

I don't want to be here, in this me, all the time.  
I tried all the escapes: drugs, alcohol, indolence, avoidance,  
—the things one expects—  
crying, screaming, attempts to tear myself free by force of will.

You imagine by now, the part of me who doesn't want to die  
has won these terrific battles

so far.

But if I had a dog,  
surely, they would sympathize with those lows.  
I imagine a cat might too, in their own way.

Perhaps indifferent  
but sporting a sneer from across the room.

For disturbing their peace, a downstairs neighbor  
could bang on the ceiling,  
or even my apartment door.

I often wonder who will take care of my body when I can't.  
I think these things because no one is here to help with the rest.

My father answers with the very same.

Worry

In my memories,  
shaming his children's poor decisions,  
foretelling their futures as his own longsuffering,  
his gainless pains.

I don't know which parts of my wounds are his,  
but it must be like this for everyone, right?  
Even if they didn't have parents?

*Somebody* was there?

A *someone* left a mark?

Which is worse—the pain of absence, or that of the ingrained,  
the daily losses incurred from happiness and joy, stolen away?

Are those left to sift through wastelands of terror worse off?  
Am I a fool for asking?

## When the Blaze Comes Again

There will be no smoke on the horizon  
revealing its languid crawl  
or cruel prophecy

ingress immediate, no motion at all  
no smell of cinder, no animal flood or scurry

No haze in the air, no scarlet sun  
the soul twine is spun, cast down, tangled thing

you remember naught but the run  
a fallow hollow rapacious during.

When it's done, fawn, sweep up your ashes  
but store them far from an urn.

Spread thin over skin, coat your fragile fleshs,  
until the rage comes again you're safe you hidden burn.

Pick through the pumice, gentle maker, inside your hull,  
that almost-husk  
leave some fairytale trace  
something white  
your skull.

## **The Mutual Benefits of Keeping Pets**

A soft throw pillow offers space for squeezing,  
for raking your nails against while teeth groan,  
and tears grind your resilient face with agony and salt.  
Buy a second to model companionship and trust.

You need Dutch ovens, ceramic, round and cerulean,  
though I recommend the 7.5-quart models,  
deep like graves and sung like bells.  
Be careful not to overfill or stir in too much.

You should keep a chore or mess to make yourself modest,  
earnest, and active—and cleaning will always be there,  
when you need it and when it needs you, too.  
Use a broom for standing, a brush for collapsing.

Reminders scrawled on notepads to manage time,  
decorate your breakfast bar, and keep company the mail—  
unopened, scattered, stacked, and seen every morning.  
A purple pen will dampen their abrasive tone.

All the memories you have but do not want,  
mark them down for later keeping and salvage,  
in piles of kilobytes buried documents down, creasing.  
They are brittle under the weight of your dreams.

Times you nearly died store well in the flesh and keep you fit,  
racing nerves, rumbling cells, and galvanizing shaky thoughts,  
but their scurry leads to partial liquefaction.  
Lie in a warm bath to gently drown their lightning.

## Midheaven

I choose to end on the word “terrorized” for a reason—  
it is a word that does not tell the experience,  
and while collective our terrorism may be,  
the specific forms in which it takes shape  
will never be achieved by words alone.

I was led to a specific question:  
Where is the theory  
for which my daily temptations  
to end myself can be fully explained—  
how did they become fleshed?

Who else is responsible  
Who else cuts my words

how does one un-knife the mind,  
in just the right way  
so that it makes sense enough?

## Letter to the Proverbial X

I remember  
the tremble of my nails  
    when first we saw each other  
    our faces bright, worried—that August like paste,  
        humid, hazed.  
We stood on your carport,  
    the royal-blue Jeep perched on the hill like  
phlegm in the throat.  
    —I couldn't have spit—  
The sweltering street in hot rubber streaks  
    asphalt perfume, blue jeans, orange summer dust,  
        then melting tires  
screaming awake   lead foot your panic  
    too much to drink      blood-sucking veer  
        sinking guts  
world spun  
    world spun  
    carousel  
trilled chest   pink lung  
    eyes convalescent, clear white  
    shock   percussion  
then quiet, yellow veins.  
        I remember  
your face after, bismuth glimmer  
    rich and serene  
        prismed dusk  
            then you stood in the room  
            sheened by the sun  
    bronze  
        bees in my belly  
cold sheets, open mouth  
    wet, craving  
        sweat, tea tree oil  
open shutter, long exposure  
unsealed vault  
grave, exhumed.  
        We talked about moving West,  
        about wind and foam on the shore.

I don't remember you anymore.  
I don't remember what you gave me.  
I'm gone from then

uncoiled, snapped piano wires  
curling back, river's roar  
tender gears, grinding, down  
down, I'm down  
down and down  
I don't fit  
I never fit  
That was the problem, right?  
Not that I don't bless the book  
that I exist, subsist  
in a way  
you couldn't bear.  
It was the closest I ever came to death.  
Now I'm Death, carry it close, you were Hell,  
a shape, a terror  
I do not understand the earth,  
nor do I remember your breath  
your heaving lung

but I know now what made you afraid  
am eased to have never hurt  
that way, again  
too kindly

in the clasp of a heart  
rainbow light  
trapped in a jar

but not yours.

## It arrives

without exception, during the pandemic

a friend who cannot carry me ferries me to groceries  
at times, it is so quiet and routine I worry it's for pity  
that I'm too queer  
and alienated  
and unfortunate  
to be a good pet.

my need to monitor relationships is inversely proportional to shame

my friend asks why I call it *the bathroom*  
it's yours, they say. Why do you say *the*  
my pronouns aren't so convivial with permanence  
being thrown away can lead to impermanence efficient stasis  
I don't know how to explain either, so I laugh

my urge to monitor relationships is directly proportional to shame  
excess material emphasis is disquieting, but things given to me, matter

my mother read stories about others from *Guideposts*  
often, her tears made the reading take a little longer  
trying to stop my own made listening just as difficult  
my brothers too, and sometimes even our dad  
other times, he roared from the house, to his shop  
to work on something, because mom was too choked up

interior designers hide things:  
matters, rooms, whole people in moons, planets, minds and plans, emotional filters.

I'm outraged when I find the corner with the tiny box that has my bones inside  
the hidden table, my body, my guts chopped and stitched, and shrouded  
the ones who build, space after place, illusions, from my flesh, and permanence  
they weld even the air, cutting, sewing, pairing knives and needles, busy  
they look like me and ask what I'm doing there, why I have thread not a scalpel instead



**Dear Grindr**

In five years, I watched you grow  
from “sup”  
to “how’s your night”  
to  
“Everything alright?”

I guess it’s improvement, but I wish I knew

who did this  
who gave you my body  
my exhales  
my words.

Why have they continued to wait

to hope  
to meander  
when they knew you were no different  
a fixed cardinal point  
a comfortable ruin on repeat  
one to revisit by choice or compulsion  
is there really a difference?

I do not know this person who has never seen your house this me  
who doesn’t know what you feel why you still visit

if you feel  
if you miss people, or only parts  
if something is missing  
or someone

if you are afraid  
if you have forgotten you want more  
if you didn't know you could want more

if "more" makes your mind a stone skipping across water

if your mother told you not to want or cry

or your father

if too many someone's said "be a man"

if they, at the unfairness of life, lashed you instead  
silently

a sawtooth rage cutting children apart

if they boxed you up in different rooms

if you were afraid of the walls and your pieces

but learned to love them

their halt their "don't be this or that"  
if you could  
speak to one part or many

what word would make you whole?

Could you find that child his hands his mouth

and give them touch

and air

and sound to answer back

would they tell you how long the tomb takes to crumble  
to lose its choke  
its walls  
its un-mothering smoke

Do you know a single tear, and what did it say?

Does the bottom ever return to the stomach, or is it always a pit?  
Do the pieces come back together,  
or like the universe, are they forever flying away,  
infinite in scatter,  
and scant?

## Dear Tinder

I am worried about the heterosexuals.  
I am worried about them because they are worried about me.

About what restrains me when I am alone  
and trying to exist.

They forget that every time I go near them,  
their trap springs shut

the cage      the door

the entangling monster  
claws ready  
jaws    saliva

chains sprouting      seeking  
                                         finding.

They forget that, like them,  
the trap is everywhere.

Did you know? That they are here?  
Or was it intentional, your ignorance,

another trap?

One like my hollows:  
the grave is necessary, but never full?

Why do I come here?

Did I need another place to pretend  
there's someone out there,      like me?

A queer kind of lock, to safely fasten      my latch?

Something other than one to mangle my guts  
force my face into a mirror—

or was desecration your ploy      your plan

all along?

## Dear Social Network

I don't want to remember,

or see again

the rancid rot you insist I consume,                      sink my teeth into.

I don't care it has been tailored exquisitely  
by millions of lines of electric code that,

like the clothes I want but can't afford,  
the makeup I don't have time, patience,  
or know-how to apply,

I'll never touch.

I will not pause to be fleeced for my attention.

I will not contribute, pull the trigger,                      like-machine-gun.

I'm gonna scroll,  
my eyes                      on endless stroll

not instinct, not clicking bone  
efforts put towards                      manage the toll

of all your broken promise  
and seedy malice  
the relentless eyes

your rage  
the thoughtful cage  
a revision of the world with strange light  
your run on dopamine banks.

I do not need another group; I have too many to choose from already.

Those who tell me who I am, but don't do it well,  
those who tell me who I shouldn't be, and do it well  
those who balk at my existence, because I shouldn't be  
who tear at themselves  
who insist I feel less and less, that it's alright, their generous harm,  
that there is solace in things making sense even less  
that no matter how tight this bubble gets,

and dangerous,            its comfort,

    this seat above the squabbling  
    will deliver on a promise—

the last euphoria is coming soon,  
    the rush, the likes, the love, the petting drug,  
                                    the future is never  
                                    the past is forbidden

you'll forget the plunger's empty if you squeeze hard enough  
                                    just click  
                                    take the bait  
                                    keep it close  
                                    let it crash

the mass will burst through the gates of your soul  
    coat you in fresh, algorithmic rime.

    Mark my words, the feed's convincing you this time  
    it's real, it's true, this world of only white and blue.

You do not want me, but I want you.

I want a hammer for your mirrors    and after,  
to drown the pieces in the mud of a river.

    And if in froth and suds their lies rise to the top,  
    I'll be ready with a clench,  
                    hands of salt            and vinegar.

Letter to 🙄🍊

I'm sorry we had to go through this again,  
but I got so lonely that I forgot why I didn't like you,  
why I had stopped degrading myself

by seeking your attention  
and thus my own value.

I'm sorry I can't find it appealing that you wish  
to depersonalize this transaction as much as possible,

that I can't immerse myself  
in the somatic impulse of reptile brains

so that you can  
"grab that ass and go to work."

I'm sorry that, bearing this in mind, you find two men kissing  
far too intimate  
a step beyond the pale  
inhospitable—

No, you said, "going too far."

Too far beyond the aforementioned labor, I guess,

of laying pipe.

## Trauma Lasagna

It tends to come together that way, yes?  
The body as container, as vessel—a pan.  
Something fitting for cooking, for bubbling up.  
An overflow mocking the exterior—all your best-laid plans.  
We'll start with a heavy white capital coating,  
add cis-hetero patriarchy, and cold Calvinism cream.  
All their raging little violence emulsifies the meat.  
Don't forget a dash of poverty,  
parents of parents, boiled plentifully,  
two pounds of blood bone abuse,  
plus narcissism, resentment, and war.  
Generations in the making, hold a dash for reserve.  
Now for the filling—one child and their means.  
Peace, scarce. Just a pinch. Dreams, minced.  
Simmer hope under pressure,  
pause for stirring, sedimentation, patience.  
Shouting, screaming, threats—your reduction whispers.  
Don't forget brutality, corporeal punishment,  
the stirring, the roil, the churning, the toil.  
As you prep to lay layers, aim to spread them out.  
When it's time to sprinkle in those rapes,  
there's no certain order, but strive to leave nothing neat.  
Now for nightmares, meds, HIV, and unaffordable therapy.  
Check your measurements again, add futility.  
This isn't comprehensive, but we've spared no expense,  
self-harm, or self-doubt—when nearly done, if too hard a dish,  
compensate with disorders, but shoot for a double batch.  
Give a sprinkling of sabotage, next gasoline, then a light,  
and last but not least, test the bake with a pin.  
Let it stand, utensil ready—give it one hell of a fight.



## she\_he\_they

She arrived not so serendipitously  
due to the restraints upon her.  
Glow-in-the-dark stars,  
candle-lit lanterns, Litebrite faces,  
periwinkle glitter nail polish,  
a flashbulb under the sheets—  
these are the lights she remembers,  
incandescent memories that survived  
moments when she was not allowed  
to be there, so she hid away to exist  
when she meant to sail on a satin comet  
across the twinkling cosmos,  
on a curtain of care and hope.  
Later, while he fished for crawdads  
in the creek, her muse stayed on a plate of oysters,  
a pate of duck liver with cheese and crackers  
and orange zest shrimp with cream and capers  
just beside, and thing too rich for him,  
who afraid, hid in his room, in music,  
drawings building dirty fleeting hopes  
for miracles, because he loved another boy at twelve,  
but having noticed them sooner, knew how different—  
how his dreams and wants did not belong  
on the earth, should not dare touch the tongue,  
so he prayed at night for God to change him  
he cried and cried that God would fix him  
tore at himself and the air in his lungs  
and begging to be made right in the dark  
as he slept, not to wake with a start,  
not to be the same, so ashamed,  
and if not, to die, not to wake, to sink  
to drop and fall all the way down,  
and never return. They were hiding, too,  
looking for the others, searching for a way  
out of the gloom, looking for air,  
for the break, the coming crashing wave,  
the sun on the shallows, blinding,  
the ray of feeling right and leaping  
out into the cold of night, keeping  
them warm, in a place like hands,  
just as they had done all along,  
as they would do from now on,

helping as they could to find a name  
a face, a sound, a look, a feel,  
the time it takes to sit alone and heal,  
to go back when you shouldn't return,  
find the right kind of ground, and standing upon  
speak into the world a truth—  
noun, verb, place—*I am here.*

## Friends Come and Go

but they never say why, or how  
you lose them over trivial things,  
showing them too much of you  
when you are too messy, too heavy,  
little disagreements, like gas money and time,  
they move, they say they miss you,  
but they won't write back, not unless they need you,  
they put you on a shelf, pick you up their occasion,  
but only if they can't solve it, their small problem.

I am tired of these friends who come and go,  
who think I understand their problems,  
but cannot allow my aches for more.

Do they have others, like me?  
A big collection on the marble mantle,  
a nightstand drawer full of keeps?

Do we belong in a box in the attic,  
or stored away in a basement, in tupperware?  
Have they buried us in the backyard, in a neat little tin?  
Or are we more like mice—unseen, unwanted,  
a pest even when we snap loud to death in their traps,  
or quietly, missing them alone, in the gaps between their walls?

## Hermeneutics of Despair

The principal body suffers from immoral inadequacy,  
by design, an ill-conceived vessel for supreme,  
high-performance being—  
a prison.

Did you know? There is symmetry to the soul  
and it is non-euclidian, non-rhizomatic, loose,  
or emergent, but immanent and whole.

Father is a cop—his hours of outrage for disobedience  
and lack of rule—your ways—adds a special spice to sin,  
unlike others who sleep, you stay awake, cayenne.

These men do what they want with you; move you  
as a tool meant to suit them; I know the grip  
of their hands, their fingers tight round the hair—  
you cannot ply them free  
so cut each one by the root.

Should I have my way, I'm becoming a sleek sympoetic  
asexual (but fully functional) cyborganism that gives  
Donna Haraway a run for her money—  
no, debilitating orgasms.

My gender is corneas on ice, a lovechild born  
from the Laniakea and Virgo superclusters,  
spit from their vast antediluvian churn—  
for the flood I was given no boat  
so from their old, rugged cross I'll make  
a vessel unto honor  
without rot

## The Good Shepherd

He is not good, no not one.  
With every stinking breath he lies,  
has put our blood in the dirt and mortar,  
our bones upon the foundation of the world,  
that is the way he has willed it, to warm  
the seat of his god with our dying breath  
to extract from our tears the salt rubbed  
in our wound.

He will cull the flock when needed,  
shear from your back the wool pulled  
over your sheepen eyes. He will make unto  
the figurehead of the one true King,  
that white pillar cutting the sky,  
a burnt offering, an answer  
to the clarion call for the soul  
of humankind.

I know because I know him. He is my father,  
and his blood is in me. Do you hear me?  
He will not yield. Do you not yet understand?  
Not all is dying and soon to leave the world  
in mourning—we have crossed the precipice—  
one earth is not enough, nor a dozen  
for this tyrant. From his zeal no planet is safe  
not a sun, not a cross and its shield, no haven  
for the patron saints perched on the cornice.  
They have left the building sitting on a ledge.  
Can you hear them? This is the avalanche, they sing and hum,  
and not a hundred million apostates wielding the word  
can make a difference, can stand against,  
that sinister might.

It isn't coming, child, it is here, *the Fall*,  
have you not seen the crimson sky  
heard the animals crying out at its red  
that there is no shoulder to weep upon,  
no mother to carry our burdens or  
hear us repent  
she is not dead, but there, her heart  
it sits on a spit, stilled already and killed  
by fruitless waiting.

We were not good stewards  
I know, I fear  
now comes the last judgment  
poured from a cup  
a smoldering day  
churning to the sound of talking heads  
trumps, and quake, and drums  
the smoke, the thrum  
the dust of the last tower falling  
smiting the sun  
the inferno of our breath, its break, the burn of an hour  
the gasp of our collective sigh, the earth,  
our bodies as a spear, one nebulous, futile hope  
to spare her calving womb  
spurn a chance beyond the breach  
that impassable envelope:

the cold of the screen, black, quiet, that mirror—  
let us give it to Charon for passage  
instead of a coin  
let us vie for resurrection  
on some other plain that doesn't dare tell of its choke

## Wane

I've failed to write this poem for a while now.  
The one where I tell my story in as few words as possible.  
Because that is what artists are supposed to do.  
Capture impossibles with instant.  
But I see a wall.

A sign, reading: *you haven't lived.*

Am I human?

## Dysphoria Blues

I am perversely aware of the wrongness of my body.  
But by this point, pushing forty, some of that should have waned,  
yes? A presupposition, that expectation, arriving from others, and people.  
Their comforts I don't need to imagine, for with pronounced ease,  
they walk, and talk—it causes me to question the pain I sense, the disease.

I react.

I want to share a non-binary meme on social media.  
Because I identify with sunsets, those images cloud my feed.  
But I see a word I don't know. Then, two. No, there's three.  
*Neutrois. Maverique. Gendervoid.*  
In some way, they all seem to fit. My genderfluid parts,  
they are affirmed. My non-binary-ness, complicated.

Not wearing, not feeling, wrong again, resisting, grinding against,  
conflicted, consternated, exhausted, null—these are all valid.

You see, I've been trying to figure this out for some time now,  
but to tell you the truth, sometimes I feel more kinship with sand,  
falling through fingers that scoop and grasp in futility. Or sometimes,  
that my gender is like a leak, an unmanageable spill of water from  
the upstairs apartment, a strange thing that you come home to one cold,  
January morning, hearing the unmistakable sound of it, that torrent  
and splatter on the carpet, and alarmed, knowing that sound shouldn't happen,  
you rush inside, seeing it for yourself, that waterfall in the wrong place.

A deluge of bullshit from a smoke detector. That is my gender.

When I visit, I ask mom for the pictures. She returns with several albums—  
brown, leathery binders that stuck together, peel apart like duct tape  
when I pull. As I pry open the navy-blue cover etched with diamond,  
a pattern of gold trim gilding its face, she asks what I'm looking for.  
“Evidence,” I say. Of my existence. That I was ever happy. That behind  
those eyes and mouths of mine stretched wide with grin, there isn't vacancy,  
there isn't the beginnings of understanding agony, and thus, pretense,  
for the pleasure of another.

My gender is a starving fawn lost in futile search of the forest for her mother.  
Dad wants me to see the shop. It's the same building, and I'm not any bigger,  
but it feels smaller. Much of the clutter I recognize, though like stale air,  
its order jars my memory. That seems to give him pride, the rearranging,



the control and knowing of where everything is. “I have 14 hammers,” he says, declaring next with a where most of them are. Though there aren’t hangers sitting empty, he names the ones missing, where they must be. I ask about a rubber mallet. If that too, is a hammer. “It’s not,” he answers, definitively, “It doesn’t count.” I say “okay” with acceptance, stare at rusted, worn sledges on the floor, their wooden handles sheened by use, splitting with age. They stand on their heads, upright as a pillar, waiting.

My gender is a tender bruise overwhelmed by metal and sound.

I usually leave with a box. Things I want to keep. If not, it can get burned. A couple visits ago, “the burned” filled a box that had once held a range. Old CDs, computer games, their boxes, instructional guides, childhood art—things I should have kept. Things that would have been good reminders, useful evidence. My discarding alarmed him, dad, the master firestarter, the one who always had one going. “Is this gas?” I should have asked, meaning the whole episode, or “Isn’t this easy? Isn’t this second nature?” “You don’t want to keep any of this stuff?” he asked again, in disbelief. I did, but I didn’t have a place to put it. “Too big for the train,” I said.

A box of art supplies, purchased in well meaning, but never used.  
A drywall con-job, a mess of plaster spackling rusted metal screen.

I find my old palette, stained teal, red, smelling of solvent and fume—turpenoid. A wide brush to match, one for sweeping, protractor, drafting pens, markers, triangles, and compass. A stack of papers, old manuscripts, riddled with feedback, the shifts in my own designs and making. I google the instructor after reading her criticism, stapled to my final piece, a story about a man trapped in a house. Its flaws lie in confusion, they write, in how the narrator, this character, cannot make sense of their surroundings, of the endless rooms, of the strange others populating this nightmare, who glancing through dingy glass with hollow eyes and drooling mouths, liken themselves unto the reader, who also can’t know what it means.

My gender is irreversible accusation—plagiarizing a text I do not know—the arresting terror of sitting in the silent horror of difference, subject to unchecked ridicule, outrage, and, traditional values.

A difficult child becomes a difficult student becomes a difficult educator, who when even kept on a leash, pursues difficulty. So then the manner of the strap, the methods of the one grasping its material, its color and texture, the weave of its intersecting threads, becomes more relevant, perhaps, than the unwanted thing and its thrashing it has been fashioned to quell. The equation resolves with a twist, a fist turning tight the collar,

cutting off the blood and air to instinct, to the impulse of rapid fleeing.

My gender is line, disallowed to fray, the lusting want of controlled demolition,  
a wild animal tamed, trained to disarray.

It is observed and therefore claimed by those in authority that all matter seeks  
to exist in parity with itself due to an unseen force—dark matter—  
which cannot be observed, yet, but must exist, at a ratio of six-to-one,  
because too much of the universe is missing. This does not, however,  
explain the way I feel when I put on a dress, when I spend an hour waiting  
for nail polish to dry, what I imagine before putting on makeup, what I feel after,  
routine disappointment, the weight of my flesh, the ache in my bones,  
nor does it describe the reasons why I only feel myself and my choices  
when pressed against another in whom I have first mashed my mind  
and the energy encircling our little universe together, when I know  
the air in their lungs, the shade of their sadness, the haunting forces  
swirling through their thoughts, threatening to shape their wants into urns.

My gender is a suicidal star, distraught by searching the void for its partner,  
a champion singularity birthing familiar death from within.

Before I go, I want to tell them my status, how it happened,  
but it's already too grand, the things they don't understand.  
A whole swirling cosmos, a vast mystery too broad for eyes,  
and their needs for peace of mind, a faith masterfully galvanized,  
is made stronger in the unseen than gravity, not only bending  
all light so that they cannot see, know, remember, or bear reminding,  
but that they shouldn't, and cannot admit for the sake of blinders,  
for the sanctity of mirage, their Son—not Daughter, or other—  
the prodigal child, should he not return, on the altar must burn.

I am the torch, the fuse, the gender of creation at the end of time.  
I am a black hole in the shape of God, that wandering enigma of calamity promised,  
professed, and prophesied by the last breath in the strangling gloom.

I tell my students I was raised in a cult. There are gasps, laughter—all valid.  
Saying the words evokes some element of impossibility to it, my current being,  
its stasis, my fear inside our collective fear behind the masks. I see it in the eyes,  
in the piercing gaze of everyone I pass. “Are you safe? Are you human?”  
I've known it for a while now, that constant worry, that immersion  
to hostile, biting water, the feeling of your cells being named a poison,  
your blood, your air. I want to ring the bell of the world and scream  
that it isn't any different, or new, that it's worse, far worse,  
that we've become obedient machines who devoutly drone and spit

someone else's story as our own, but here I am, in a certain kind of pulpit at the front of the room, proselytizing a fresh brand of given dooms.

This one is white, the inheritance of hypocrisy, which like the moon and its own shadow—unless cleft in two—cannot turn to face.

I want a gender of loving myself and telling my story without fear, but fear is part of me, and others should know every piece to get a sense of the puzzle, the play, what can be kept, what should be tossed away, cease, and why. But the words, they never make it to my throat, for I know the ardor of what I defy and stand against, its devotion to cruelty, what it takes to crack the glaze shielding the burnished heart. I want a gender of the wood, the human next to a tree, a pastoral, transcendental thing unblemished by the sword, that longstanding weapon wielded by Hawthorne men, romantics, and gullible everyone serving fealty to either/or. I want a gender free of literature, canon, and bone-filled mortar.

I want a gender that takes out the trash and burns down the palace, one that digs up every slithering root, brick, and grinds them back to dust, I want a fag meteor plunging deep into the ass of Congress, because it hasn't had a heart since the beginning, so fuck it, I want Hell and Death to make love in the lake of fire while God gets thrown from His chariot and trampled underfoot, and His mouth can be full of ash for a change, His abuse of power a sin unto death in this new story. I don't want a new Eden, an Adam and Steve, I want a kaleidoscope of incomprehensible chaos, a conflagration, a crucible so wild and beautiful the eyes burn in tear and flame, I want a flag that ends the world, an anthem that wipes all shame from the Book of Life and leaves its pages unfit for shredding, for scattering like glittering pills across the cosmos.

I want a mean bitch with silver hair wearing leather on a unicorn, in transition and shooting fire from their eyes, and with a brass horn shouting for the annihilation of gender as it gallops over interstellar roads. I want a gender of diffusion, of dispersion, a gender of approximation that can be seen but isn't what it appears to be. I want a gender that is null, hyper, and ultra, one that not only gives pause, but destroys the word, the notion, the impetus for either. I want to stop drowning in myself, to get yanked onto an other-plane where I do not wake up shaking, I do not need to put out a fire, to further sate a mass and forbid its collapsing, convince its despondent rage to get back in the cage, to sit and wait one day more, to ail by the wayside and watch for shooting stars,

to make a wish for the morrow when the infinite, like a night flower  
receding at the touch of cold dawn, gets another chance to bloom.

## Divination

Hear us now as you enter this sepulcher, precious child,  
a void wishing for wants filled or word laden with a word  
not a promise, but a sound nonetheless, the harkening  
fixed under your roof of bone the recompense arriving  
you are the prophet the priest the angel the lord god  
with the message the seal the trumpets sounding  
let them shake, let them quake, and make unto the end of all  
one glowing bead of hope, one shining gleam to call  
the seam between the last calamity and now a future,  
not given, not broken, not conceived of yet nor a cure  
not a grieving for the womb, for the mana undelivered  
not a sign in the heavens, nor earthen cymbal warning  
that the foundations crumble, that the seat of the world  
breaks and unbinds from iron cage an untamed wind  
and racing magma a flood a halt on the spin on the blue jewel  
to send that third of its blooded waters over stained land  
to soothe the scour, the scars, to heal every stone tumbled  
and crash down those walls, set now as graves to remind  
the lies within did not wash away as fleeting soap and sud,  
they were the ones who hurt the most, us so very well alike  
but poor for our difference, and some other thing uncared for,  
to know, to never understand, so why shiver, why give  
the toll another tally, for I know the weight of every brick,  
I know the dust and bone underfoot seeps into the mouth  
makes a home in the lungs and cracks the skin as drought,  
I want and do embrace them, each and every one,  
send away their fears squeezing hands saying, with all  
the conviction of the souls, it's going to be alright,  
the end is night the end is naught the world isn't ending,  
it has already happened yesterday and a day ago and now it bends  
again as I breathe, a seed sprouting back to consecrate itself  
once more with us all in the current of its shell, that wailing heart,  
unfurled, sets us upon the spit and licks with flaming tongue  
a fight, you will fight, the fight is the end is the beginning,  
do you see? you will not know if they believe you, so sing,  
weave a canticle of being, that you're going to make it—  
but will they, will I, and us together in that life for all,  
in that raft sailing the river in that time and place, calling  
to one another "is there room? is there room?" for me?  
and if there is, is there time to break like I need to, like her  
Time, all at once, unexpectedly so and by surprise, delivering  
unto the hour those seconds and years, the swelling swirl

of a girl who never existed, a child who subsisted, hurtling  
and is there enough of them left to make new, or have the aches  
choked out the last breath from their ark, that sacred thing  
carried since the birth of the universe, the guileless desire—  
I desire, I want, I have not been allowed to want, to be innocent,  
let me be there again, anew, untouched and unblemished,  
whole in the cradle of one who knew what to do with me  
who would allow her to be, to claim, to make, to wake  
and be terrible—to be to be to be, to let them not wait  
in the dark between the stars, invisible, unheard—do not deny  
my right to love and let me die, let me burn unburdened, let me rage  
without rule, let me scream from the pitch of night all the forsaken  
yearnings that the day could not hold in their giving arms,  
let me shake at the crack of thunder, let me be afraid of my own  
blood, of my own aching that promises to burst from my breast,  
let me break, let me break, let my world die over a crayon  
let the ruin of all hinge on an absurdity, that my right hand  
is not my left, that i cannot be a bird and fly away, let me fly,  
you are the ruler after all, you must allow, you must let, do not take  
things away from me, do not steal me away from myself  
before i have been, before i have seen myself, let me feel  
everything without reason, let me have an elegy without sense,  
don't you understand i am fragile, i can shatter at the sound  
of your voice in the sky, tell me not to be afraid of it, to search  
for god in all things, in the air and water, in a bloom, in a calm  
fall of snow or a whirl of sand, in a single tear shed over grief—  
tell me gently of that thing, of strife, of agony and the end,  
do not fashion me a flag, but if you do, name it jealous dusk,  
brisk with crisp blue flaming salmon, canary, a band of chartreuse,  
please see me, please hear me, touch me with embrace,  
let me learn and make it as i will, as a bottle cast into the sea,  
a bristling ink doused with a wish to set the water burning,  
burning for a while.

## Hell and Death Make Love in the Lake of Fire

Beneath the furies' chant rages prophecy's slop,  
a well rhythmmed with clawing arms

numbered beyond forever,

and vying for all promised parts.

And the wings and spread glass feathers,

eyes wheels and eyes

pouring wheeling

long for every middling morsel

and wheels taking orders and eyes taking patrons—

Ophanim shits a cloud of gnats

spit away with a roughened brush,

dispersed, but sure to

throne right back.

*On my tab*, Death swats, gnashing, cursing under teeth,

and then to Hell who chuffs on over, bearing cups and

quipping, "Fancy meeting fellow vermin here,

don't you think, my de-skinnéd foul?"

Death sniffs. *And that makes you fouler?*

Hell glides and leans and hums in the neon phosphorous bloom,

too thronging the mass to play less stiff, but

ever heavy snarked and gleamed,

--elbow to bar when meeting--

now tabled grinning fawned...

an ooze.

Around them, the raze and sweep take mammoth,

subduing tops and heavened bottoms, all swirled

and necessary corpses shatter and froth,

luxuriant waves denied a single void.

*The pool over flows, Death says. Cards then.*

“Full of slain and tender fleshed and promised too,” Hell says,

“Yearning for the second dead, thou savior

shade so kind to comfort atom’s soul

far down in the dumps.

And here you are, gracing us slick boned as polish



boat coined for crossing

but nary a river to run.

How are we to find our way so smitten?"

*Blood moon eclipsed, Death quips, showing their hand.*

*Kings and Queens and all between.*

"Salvation is... its own ruin?" Hell asks,

pawning their lot's faces down

and giving glimmered eyes.

*And sacrifice, Death answers. I left Charon and the Styx ages ago.*

"Boring," Hell groans, stoned up to punish gullets with another molten glass,

claiming to have heard it twice before,

though soundly, it was the first.

They pause and grunt,

"Bitter practice. Better practice!"

*I'll do my best, Death shrugs, gutted, but chumming with the hollows.*

*You lost. Now, pay up.*

“Never more Anubis, nor one of his dogged friends, either. Are you?”

*I know who I am, in this spectrum of ether.*

Hell comes near, “Then why must we labor to keep existence?”

and next, asks of Odin and Osiris, popping their lips.

*Getting withered with Arawn.*

They both spy the pack, gathered loud and tossed and pining,

waiting for their turn at the rim

behind the fallen angels who wet, fevered with mascara

and running

climb the sacred stage—karaoke.

*I'm leaving,* Death says, claiming the pile with hasty takes as raw wind

begins to wail one Bleeding Mary Mothers cover—

Mary Magdalene's

Fucking Vagisterium.

“Going?” Hell shrieks, “But why?”

Death stares. *That lot is too divinely inspired for my taste.*

“Oh, do stay, my osseous sack, remnant of my heart, do forgive! Lest something  
be burdened left and drowned, do take my blissful airs—  
may a death’s head swallow calm your course?

A rugged bone thorning hallowed crown  
on root fed ground?

By any measure, knees it is.

But should you settle for a cross and leave no matter,  
cast me deep within some  
lonely, crucible star.”

*Your words reek of mince and pill.*

*Fine. Be swift.*

“Of the known hour as duly given,” Hell weaves, certain,  
“But surely,  
thou solar lamp high at dusk  
blistering shoals of suncrest told  
and water, turn us cellar,  
red

a wound on horizon's palms."

"Lo, I am stricken fevered as any cracked bow

chilled of ails,

furnaced for your sight

wailed for your breath

listened for your curses

seen for your shun, your intransigent lung—

when such wealthy balm no longer soothes my shimmer,

pray thee tell

how must I, should I

lie on?"

*Am I to also cool your tongue?*

"Too preachy now this cumbered wreck

and our full lusty wallows muster hard to might,

but we...furious eggs tempered without a hatch.

Nay, Father, I do suspect misgivings about this rife,

or is it Mother? Death, we heard the

womb of water no longer makes.

To whom should we surrender?"

*Lilith. Their favorite daughter.*

“Blesséd few to have seen her.”

*You wanted an answer*

*And I am waiting still*

the cherubims bring another round

the seraphims light up the meek

they ease into the simmer, bound

fated garland, crowns on fleek

Death comes first, and Hell second, but when

they meet again, both twine in silence grind,

cry in raptured

pious sublime

to wreathe and grieve a churning carnal brine

They shine of brass burning up to gold,

silver brimmed and igneous souls,  
voice tempest to reed of throat,  
blistering timbres denied another choke.

The same hymnal as before

again and again and again

nailed with no shred of succor

though not without a pleading.

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APPENDIX A: QUANTITATIVE DATA, SURVEYS #1 & #2

- **Question #1:**

On a scale of 1-5, how familiar are you with the terms “fiction,” “poetry,” and “creative non-fiction?”

<b>Response</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Survey</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Survey</b>
1 = Not at all	0	0
2 = Somewhat Unfamiliar	0	0
3 = Familiar	4	0
4 = Very Familiar	6	3
5 = Extremely Familiar	8	7

- **Question #2**

On a scale of 1-5, how familiar are you with the concept of a creative writing workshop?

<b>Response</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Survey</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Survey</b>
1 = Not at all	0	0
2 = Somewhat Unfamiliar	2	0
3 = Familiar	7	1
4 = Very Familiar	5	1
5 = Extremely Familiar	4	8

- **Question #3**

Do you identify as a “creative writer?”

<b>Response</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Survey</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Survey</b>
Yes	8	9
No	6	0



Undecided	4	1
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- **Question #4**

On a scale of 1-5, how familiar are you with table-top role-playing games (e.g. *Dungeons & Dragons*)?

<b>Response</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Survey</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Survey</b>
1 = Not at all	9	2
2 = Somewhat Unfamiliar	3	1
3 = Familiar	3	2
4 = Very Familiar	1	2
5 = Extremely Familiar	2	3

- **Question #5**

Have you ever played a table-top role-playing game?

<b>Response</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Survey</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Survey</b>
Yes	3	3
No	15	7

- **Question #6**

On a scale of 1-5, how familiar are you with other types of table-top games (chess, playing cards, Uno, etc.)?

<b>Response</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Survey</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Survey</b>
1 = Not at all	0	0
2 = Somewhat Unfamiliar	0	0
3 = Familiar	4	0

4 = Very Familiar	6	0
5 = Extremely Familiar	8	10

- **Question #8**

What types of other games, whether computer-based or not, are you familiar with?

<b>Response</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Survey</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Survey</b>
Role-Playing	5	5
Sports	3	0
Board Games	9	3
Card-based	6	3
Video Games	1	5

- **Question #10**

Have you ever played an MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game) or an RPG that incorporated character avatar creation?

<b>Response</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Survey</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Survey</b>
Yes	6	6
No	11	4
Unsure	1	0

- **Question #11**

If you consider yourself a gamer, please indicate which type.

<b>Response</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Survey</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Survey</b>
Video	5	4
Table-Top	1	1

Casual	4	0
Not A Gamer	8	5

- **Question #12**

Describe what “creative writing” means to you.

<b>Response</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Survey</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Survey</b>
I’m not sure	5	0
To tell stories	6	0
A means of expression	5	7
An escape	1	3
To make something original	1	0

- **Question #13**

On a scale of 1-5, how familiar are you with fantasy/sci-fi genres?

<b>Response</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Survey</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Survey</b>
1 = Not at all	3	0
2 = Somewhat Unfamiliar	4	0
3 = Familiar	5	2
4 = Very Familiar	0	2
5 = Extremely Familiar	6	6

- **Question #14**

Do you think game-playing practices could be beneficial to other types of university classrooms?

<b>Response</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Survey</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Survey</b>
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Yes	9	10
No	1	0
Undecided	8	0

## APPENDIX B: ARTIFICE X: BEGINNING PROMPT

### ARTIFICE X: Beginning Prompt

*You awaken in a room very much like one in a clinic—a waiting room. Even though you are groggy and disoriented, you notice more than a dozen others with you.*

*They appear to have only gained consciousness themselves.*

*Before a thought can enter your mind, an odd voice scratches through some intercom you can't see, somewhere above, and between a patch of static, this voice seems to shift between a myriad of individuals, the voices resonating high and low.*

*"The Artifice . . . awaits," the voices announce.*

*By some odd compulsion, all of you in the waiting room rise together.*

*In complete silence, the group glides, one at a time through the only exit.*

*The hall stretches on for what seems like minutes, growing dark, entirely black, and then back, brighter, brighter—fluorescently bright.*

*You don't know why you are here, you don't know how you got here—you're not even sure who you are at the moment. You are dressed in white.*

*You have only now noticed that no one's footsteps can be heard, and then the hall opens to a round room of doors.*

*The wall, floor, and ceiling all appear to be some strange, colorless glass, or a highly polished stone like onyx—you are not sure. The surfaces have an odd depth to them, as though you might fall into them. This floor beneath you seems to have no bottom. You can't even be sure of what you're standing on, or standing inside of.*

*Even so, there is light all around, but where it comes from is unclear. You can only interpret this room because of its many white doors.*

*Suddenly, you are overcome by a strong nudge of familiarity—a feeling of having been here before.*

*Everyone must have felt it at once, for everyone is drawn to a door, as though they know their own.*

*You stand motionless, gazing upon your hand resting above the handles.*

*The intercom speaks. The voices come together.*

*“Enter.”*

*You twist the handle and walk through.*

## APPENDIX C: GLOSSARY OF METALOGUE SPEAKERS

*Metalogue Beta's "V"*: a speaker who embodies plural being-ness and infinite possibilities; a nebula who inhabits, at times, a singular being-ness interested in structures and their parts, including their own.

*Metalogue Delta's "C"*: a speaker who may or may not be "Lydia," but who is close enough in the nebula to Lydia such that they have access to their deep emotional possibilities.

*Metalogue Omega's "Φ"*: a speaker from the future who mines the past, who may or may not be "Aek" or some variation derived from the nebula, but who excavates the site where Lydia dwelled for eons, seeking their own answers and possibilities.

*Metalogue Omega's "Ω"*: speakers "nebula," "Lydia," "Mark," "Aek," and others who transcend, who are all speakers seeking their own singular meanings. They are speakers from elsewhere and else-when who search for a meaning yet to arrive.

*Metalogue Terra's "L"*: speaker "Ω" as "Aek," who speaks for their idea of "Lydia," their poetic works that the other metalogues find themselves concerned with (in various capacities). From the site of excavation, "Aek" has recovered "Lydia's" works.