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Living Document: An Exploration of “Self” Through Lyric & Hybrid Forms
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Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
English Department

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A Craft Exploration of “Self” Through Lyric & Hybrid Forms

In the famously confessional field of creative nonfiction, Paula Carter, Durga Chew-Bose, Heidi Czerwiec and Brian Doyle are just some of the contemporary authors attempting their own approaches to the question of narrative discretion. While the length of their pieces and respective collections vary — from Carter’s one-sentence flash paragraphs to Chew-Bose’s introductory 90-page train of thought — each author utilizes various craft techniques as a means of constructing, maintaining and controlling the distance between their readers and their experiences, their narrative vs. personal selves. By charting the authors’ definite approaches to the indefinite subject of selfhood, I hope to help celebrate and emulate their craft methods.

The creative nonfiction essay draws from a myriad network of roots, such as the personal and philosophical essays of Michel de Montaigne. These, in turn, draw from the writings of Plutarch and Lucretius — arguably a founding author of the lyrical environmental essay — in de Montaigne’s 1580 collection of *Essais*. So too did Seneca discourse with Lucretius’ work and collect his own essays, including his “Dialogues,” as early as A.D. 40. It is the notion of a written work as dialogue that truly helps to define the form; Philip Lopate explains in his introduction to *The Art of The Personal Essay* “The personal essay shows its relationship to the dialogue, an ancient form going back to Plato. Both forms acknowledge the duality, or rather multiplicity, of selves that human beings harbor” (xxiv). In this context, the purpose of the creative personal essay becomes an exploration of both the subject and selfhood’s myriad facets, its endless reflections and dimensions.

Within the field of creative nonfiction, hybrid and lyric essays are themselves made up of endless dimensions. Hybrid forms consist of overlapping genres, ways to approach topics from other directions or blended formats entirely. Some borrow textual layouts from other sources –

prescription labels, to-do lists, dictionary definitions – and used them as a “hermit crab” shell around vulnerable truths. The lyric essay is perhaps a more specific form of hybrid, a literary chimera drawing upon the intersection of poetic and prose forms while offering imaginative representations of objective fact. As Deborah Tall and John D’Agata famously defined for the *Seneca Review*, the lyric “sets off on an uncharted course through interlocking webs of idea, circumstance, and language - a pursuit with no foreknown conclusion, [and] an arrival that might still leave the writer questioning.” The mercurial nature of the hybrid and lyric essay is well-suited, then, to the challenge of both conveying and navigating the depths of oneself. Lopate explains the risk in “On The Necessity of Turning Oneself into a Character,” where “In [the writers’] minds, the ‘I’ is swarming with background and a lush, sticky past, and an almost too fatal specificity, whereas the reader, encountering it for the first time in a new piece, sees only a slender telephone pole standing in the sentence, trying to catch a few signals to send on.” How, then, does the writer succinctly illuminate one’s complexity without offering several hundred pages of personal context? Or, to consider the other side of the coin: How can authors provide the truth of a story, sensation or image without giving entirely too much away?

The moralistic slant towards idealizing honesty and praising transparency has only further developed alongside modern media. Documentaries, tell-alls and memoirs have collided with the content of “candid” social media sites and smartphones, allowing for constant, self-imposed surveillance in the pursuit of “being genuine.” In a time where each happy memory requires photographic evidence and every passing hobby is expected to be capitalized upon, is it possible to speak honestly of oneself without sacrificing discretion? To maintain a personal distance between subject and self, product and personhood? Montaigne’s method has been described as “If you wish to preserve your secret, wrap it up in frankness” (Lopate xxvii).

However, modern writers suggest there may be other wrapping papers to choose from.

Such as Heidi Czerweic's *Fluid States*, a lyrical collection of perfumed prose, personal narratives and environmental meditations combined with startling economy of space: it ends precisely on the 100th page. Czerweic, who initially wrote poetry before approaching creative nonfiction, utilizes her stylistic background to offer emphasis on line breaks, subject lengths and white space. There is often a distinct disconnect between each piece's topic, an abrupt shift of gears from the history of fragrances to the risks of crumbling relationships. The scattered immediacy of her subjects helps to disorient and engage her readers; just as a lost hiker stares a little more closely at their surroundings, so too does Czerweic's collection demand one's full attention and suspension of expectations.

Fluid States opens with a collection of "Decants", quick narratives interspersed with poetic interludes that, as we are told by the first piece, are called "smoke-long stories" in China for "the time it takes to breathe in those brief pieces on perfume, *per fume*, through smoke." (10). This etymological aside immediately helps to establish the section's trademarks: lists of top-notes and the history of names, biographies both personal and cultural. While the subject matter may lie close to Czerweic's skin the perspective of these pieces vacillates, as we come closer and stretch farther from Czerweic with each interlude. For instance, her five "decants" dedicated to Chanel No. 5 moves distantly through a retrospective of the scent's legacy in a cool third person perspective. Only the fifth and final piece offers the intimacy of a first-person narrator, of immediate desires and emotions. Compared to the longer meditations on the scent's creation and cultural consumption, "No. 5: [1990, 1991]" has the shortest sentences and one of the shortest overall lengths. The prose turns from meandering academic explanations, such as "No. 3: Iconic [1960]" — "An instant success with the New Woman, it survived by exclusivity, desire its sole

advertisement, until the fragrance [was] tainted by Coco's unsavory association with the fishy Vischy government" (22) — to rapid staccato statements of fact, raw need. "A boy I loved and favored for a lover took me to prom twice" begins the fifth decant, its prose descending into poetry by the final admissions of "I wanted the boy / to touch me, wrap me in his sheets; / he never did" (25).

Her final decant, "Ekphragance", is a master class in list-making as a means of gradually growing ever closer to the author. As Aimee Nezhukumatathil explains in the *Rose Metal Guide*, "Writing lists in this way may at first seem like you are writing *around* a subject... But keep at it. Separate each tidbit and step of knowledge of observation. Leave your reader some white space and room to breathe and reflect between each morsel. When you telegraph or 'kaleidoscope' your subject in this fashion, you will find surprise and recognition layered with new understandings and new renderings of the subject, so full of dark and good smells..." (*Rose Metal Guide* 114). Naturally, good smells are at the heart of Czerweic's piece; the essay is itself structured as a list of shorter paragraphs, of fragmentary aspects. Beginning with perfume as "a temporo-spatial performance", the prose lingers in an objective third-person observation of the open air surrounding a woman's wrist, the narrative space of writing about art from a pseudo-academic distance, coming closer with a fragment labeled "Description": a literal list of scents, impressions, movements, art. In "Narrative" the narrative "I" emerges, appears, and digresses to a list of perfumes with rich personal histories. "Madeleine-Moments" comes closer still: opening "[W]hen I was 19" but digressing to yet another list; "French, fire-red nails and long scarves, espresso in a crusty old Bialetti." This abstracts still further to one of Czerweic's poetic fragments: "scent's molecules sent / straight to the limbic brain / memory's shortcut" (39). At which point readers are abruptly — and literally — inside her head, watching limbic neurons

fire.

These poetic lines bring us roughly as close as we can be without a visible “my” or “I”, but this lack is remedied by the final fragment: “Message in a Bottle” offers a list of scents, immediate sensations and staccato sentences scattered with colons, shocking in the wake of Czerweic’s commas and run-on sentences in previous fragments. We readers are still in her head but now literally hearing her thoughts, as well as discerning the scent on her skin: a perfect loop to the beginning and its scented air around an unnamed woman’s wrist. “Tobacco, cedar, fig: *I want to snuggle*” she instructs us. “Calbanum, leather accords: *I’m feeling confident, aggressive*. Civet, labdanum, styrax, musk: *let’s fuck*” (40). Immediate sensations, intimate physical distance, and a remarkably direct sense of her thoughts rounds out the fragments. That this is precisely where “Ekphragance” ends helps to demonstrate how such a crescendo of craft techniques can be combined as a finishing touch.

Czerweic’s next piece, “Bear” moves from the intimacy of skin-to-skin to the abstracted command of a second person: “You are with A__, you’re first husband” (43). While the piece is divided into abrupt paragraphs, the lack of explicitly titled fragments allows the prose to rearrange itself something more conventionally narrative. And yet this narrative is interspersed with paragraphs of research, once again devoid of a visible narrator: “Their jaws, while not long, have a bite pressure of 1,200 pounds per square inch” readers are warned in the first aside, but even this list-making eventually grows closer: “[Y]ou’re most likely to die in late summer, if you surprise the bear, and if you run... The best you can do is try to protect your head and neck” (46).

By hiding the emotional danger of the relationship with A__ within the physical risk of the bear — “Suddenly it looms above you - the truth that your marriage is a fragile thing, too

easily crushed, as if by a careless paw” — Czerweic establishes her own anxieties without ever once placing herself within the scene (46). Instead it is “you” who feels her fear, as well as the dangers posed by inanimate wild elements: “The wind is shifting” the concluding line warns in an ominous redirection from the state of the relationship, “The bear is approaching” (47). As Jennifer Sinor explains in the *Rose Metal Guide*; “At the moment the ‘I’ enters, the prose changes, signifying the shift in responsibility for the story” (60). By externalizing the internal chaos and placing the reader within its immediate danger, Czerweic allows you to feel what she cannot bear to say.

It is Czerweic’s hybrid craft essay within the collection, “Consider the Lobster Mushroom”, which perhaps best proves the power of projection. In “Bear” the reader is allowed to take the place of the narrator’s projected fears; in “Consider the Lobster Mushroom” we are pseudo-lectured on how authors may use the skill, a feat of narrative ventriloquism still instructing us in second person commands. “Or, you may play the part of the parasite — cloak your work, make it take the appearance of another form: an essay disguised as a list, a letter, an index, a diary. A hermit-crab essay. A lobster mushroom” (69). The essay asks its readers to negotiate “the value of the mushroom against how compromised its become.” It offers the valuable fact that, in terms of poisonously intimate or raw writing material for the essay writer, “You don’t have to reveal the source of your mushrooms. Few enthusiasts do, going to great lengths to conceal their sites by lying, covering their tracks. But most are happy to share the fruits of their labors, the fruited mushrooms, the finished product, however fraught. You can share, without sharing everything” (71). While the piece reads as an important lesson and example of narrative distance, the final line admits “Is this a craft essay infected by a lyric essay, or a lyric essay infected by a craft essay?” (71). By melding the two forms, digressing and

informing while concealing the soft spots of her own anxieties, Czerweic allows space for the reader's engagement and distraction whilst simultaneously admitting something true.

It is the open space for audience engagement, the “dialogue” between what is read and what is *felt*, which helps Czerweic's and Doyle's collections to be so compelling. In *The Wet Engine*, Doyle's meditation on his son's terrifying heart condition, the strategic use of varying perspectives, research-based digressions, and the immediacy of second person commands allows readers to become immersed in an otherwise alienating subject matter. “You want to reach a reader in just a few paragraphs? To enlist, endear, seduce, inspire, provoke and collude?” Dinah Lenney asks, espousing the benefits of second-person commands (*Rose Metal Guide* 101). As Chloe Caldwell remarks upon reading her first lyric essay; “How did she do that? Take something from her life and craft it into this moving piece of art that resonated with me even though it had nothing to do with me? I inserted myself in the words and made her experience mine. I've learned this notion of not knowing where you end and the artist begins, while watching films and reading books, has a term: participation mystique. The concept is closely tied to projection” (Caldwell 186). Doyle understands the weight of his subject matter to be a potentially unfamiliar one — how many of us are fathers to brilliant boys with asymmetrical heartbeats? — and often, considerately, allows us our distance. His lyric pieces expand into the biography of his son's surgeon Dave, into the long history of cardiology discoveries, even the relative size of a whale's heart, before contracting the focus back to the immediate, intimate, and personal. While this careful pattern of perspective helps to balance the reader's experience, it also serves a more metatextual purpose: mimicking the heartbeat of its subject matter.

While known as a novelist and essayist, Doyle surely possesses a poet's mastery over sentence lengths both great and small. His occasional staccato statements are often used to

bookend the delightfully comma-laden sentences which are his trademark; “Let us contemplate, you and I, the bloody electric muscle. Let us consider it from every angle” begins “Heartchitecture”, picking up speed and length in the opening paragraph alone as it hurtles towards the concluding string of commas; “Let us unweave the web of artery and vein, the fluttering jetties of the valves, the coursing of ions from cell to cell, the sodium that is your soul, the potassium that is your personality, the calcium that is your character” (16). His commas and semicolons allow readers to trip ever forward, heart-rates increasing alongside his lengthening portmanteaus (eventually reaching such descriptions as “I rub the peachfuzzcrewcutted heard of my boy when he wanders past me in the kitchen” (53)) only to be drawn up short by the unexpected.

“Imo Pectore” is one of the essays most closely contracted to the immediacy of Doyle’s subjective experience while still, astonishingly keeping emotional descriptors to a minimum. The piece is riddled with run on sentences, “The days pass one by one and the doctors watch the second boy with sharp eyes and they say every day no, no surgery yet, no, wait and watch, no there’s a hole in his heart that if it closes we will do the surgery immediately, but if it doesn’t there’s no immediate hurry” eventually stretches for over 100 words and establishes a dull grindstone of anxiety, without ever once informing the reader “I feel _____” (41). This pattern of prose helps to establish reader expectations, allowing even greater impact when the pattern finally breaks in a chilling description of his newborn son’s first diagnosis.

Doyle maintains strategic distance within the scene by issuing commands and abstracting himself almost entirely, allowing the reader to feel the truth of an otherwise unfathomable memory; “You and your wife are perched on the edge of your chairs looking into his eyes and staring at the sheets of paper in his hands. You remember every word that comes out of his

mouth because every word is your son, your son's life, your son's heart, your fear, your love" (41). Compared to the previous hundred-word sentences, this line is almost startlingly short. Now, the lengthy sentences come from Dr. Dave; "Complex congenital cyanotic heart disease, says Dave. Situs solitus of the viscera, ventricular inversion with hypoplasia of the right ventricle and tricuspid valve, ventriculoarterial disordance, annular pulmonary and subvalvular stenosis" (42.) The reader-Doyle's only response to this: "Pause." Visually, the scene is arresting for its rapid line breaks and unexpectedly short responses. The page layout conveys something of the scene, the unsettling way it stretches, no movement or names listed save for untagged lines of dialogue dancing around what cannot be confessed; "He should do very well. / What if he doesn't? / He should do very well" (42-43). As Lenney explains, perhaps the kindest benefit to writing a scene around "you" is the distance it allows a reader from their subject. "'You' allows you to take a step back; to watch yourself go through the motions in a way that is almost scientific, and that therefore precludes going-through-the-motions in the prose, (*Rose Metal Guide* 101). To say what cannot be said and make reader feel what they have not felt; such is the remarkable craft of *The Wet Engine*.

Although Durga Chew-Bose's *Too Much and Not The Mood* could not prefer a more superficially different sentence style — "Isn't it fun to read a sentence that races ahead of itself?" she asks, "That has the effect of stopping short—of dirt and cutaway rocks tumbling down the edge of a cliff, alerting you to the drop" (23) — there remain distinct similarities between Doyle's collection and her opening essay. The introductory "Heart Museum" is a 90-page lyrical train of thought that trips and dashes and doubles back between time and space, perspectives and pop-culture meditations, the individual and universal, only barely brushing the surface of more sensitive truths despite the studied air of oversharing. Chew-Bose claims the piece is "largely

composed of interceptions. Starting somewhere, ending elsewhere. Testing the obnoxious tech of my tangents. Likely failing” while the vast array of subjects are arranged in such a way “That conjunctions are accomplice... How a stranger’s laundry line discloses the arrival of a newborn or the week’s absentmindedness: once-white sheets and T-shirts, all flapping in the wind, all tinted pink” (40).

The piece is so varyingly and delightfully broad as to be nigh-impossible to summarize. It would likely be easier to describe by virtue of what it *doesn't* describe, which films and movies and family histories, friendships and relationships and synesthetic pleasures are absent from its vast attention span. Just as Doyle’s collection metatextually mimics his subject, so too does Chew-Bose confess that “Basically, and for what it’s worth—not much!—I’m proficient at having my attention drawn away. I’ve adjusted my senses to life’s incoherence” (48). Similarly, she asks “How many versions of happiness involve a smile? Are determined by feeling fulfilled? My version swears by distraction. By curling up inside the bends of parentheses. I digress, but not idiomatically. I digress intentionally” (39-40). It is the exhaustive scope of her digressions which imbues “Heart Museum” with its strange power, its delightfully off-topic asides demanding the reader’s attention lest they skip a word and miss a movement entirely.

As Judith Kitchen defines in her essay on “The Art of Digression”, “To digress: to stray from the subject, to turn aside, to move way from. The concept of moving away, turning aside, is an important one. This is not quite the same thing as changing the subject, or moving toward something else. Instead it is a natural outflow of association, an aside that grows directly out of the material and builds until it has a life of its own—it is getting a bit lost on the way out in order to make discoveries on the way back” (*Rose Metal Guide* 119). Just as Czerweic’s shifting subjects demand close scrutiny on a collection-wide level, Chew-Bose’s unpredictable

explorations engage readers on a sentence-level, sometimes even word-to-word. This technique is a carefully chosen one; as she digresses into a lengthy explanation of the personality type she belongs to christened “Nook people”: those “who seek corner and bays in order to redeploy our hearts and not break the mood.” Chew-Bose explains “Their ambition is not to be understood outright, but to return to an original peg. To share without betraying whatever mechanism individuates him or her. Perhaps that’s what we call our disposition. How becoming is multipart, but mainly a pilgrimage inward. If you share too much of yourself, you risk growing into someone who has nothing unacknowledged” (61). Her “over-sharing” then, is a surprising study in maintaining privacy despite an intimate narrative distance.

“Heart Museum” begins with lists of the physical and mundane, the sort of quotidian events which provide a pleasant sense of familiarity to readers with a collective “we” before delving deeper into her own specifics of “I.” How our hearts beat “Even when we’re pressing snooze and rolling over in bed, folding ourselves into our covers and postponing the day’s bubbling over, and soon after notching cold butter on warm toast, or later coming to a halt as we bound up a flight of subway stairs only to stall behind an elderly woman whose left leg trails behind her right leg” she offers on page four, before rambling and narrowing her focus over the next several pages into “Even when I’m caught off guard by a lathery shade of peach on the bottom corner of a painting at the Met.... or my friend Doreen’s laugh—how living and opposite of halfhearted it is. Or my beautiful mother growing out her gray” (9).

Chew-Bose carefully utilizes the universal as an entrance into her thought process, a latching-on point for the reader that keeps us in bewildered suspense for the breathless 90-page piece until we understand the significance of what the heart means to her. That her father has a torn valve is a fact we are not privy to until page 67. In the rare instances in which her father’s

health is addressed, it is barely offered as an aside; “When there was a tear in my father’s valve, I wondered if he missed his father” she muses (80). But first, for dozens of pages preceding this revelation: a thousand and one sensations, movie scenes and song lyrics which readers may cling to. She allows familiarity to make way for the eventual defamiliarization in a way that surely seems related to Doyle’s contractions and Czerweic’s mushrooms.

So too does Chew-Bose speak to collective voices: immigrant children, nook people, a global array of geographies and a vast nation of film buffs, with movie references encompassing too many pages to count. Movies speak to the universal, and “Heart Museum” feels something like it: easily approachable to mass audiences at first glance; stringing us along for what feels like hours but speeds by in vignettes of scenes, sounds, sensations; impeccable pacing that allows viewers to project themselves onto the screen. Kitchen says of digression “[W]e end up ‘taking off’ from the essay a hand, reliving moments from our own lives, rephrasing our positions on issues, meandering into the world of our own thoughts even as we follow the course of someone else’s thinking. The reading process is far more interactive, more like engaging in a discussion. This interactivity, I suspect, is because a major element in reading nonfiction is the assumption of the author’s presence as a distinct character. Thus, in a sense, we read to digress—to argue and compare and extemporize—as much as we read to ‘get there,’” (*Rose Metal Guide* 119). By making herself a character in her self-directed film, Chew-Bose offers a kaleidoscopic whirlwind of sensational digressions while maintaining impressive narrative privacy.

The lyrical flash of Paula Carter’s *No Relation* offers readers a similar shortness of breath by means of dramatically shorter essays; the collection boasts multiple pieces comprised of no more than five sentences (19, 122, 126). A navigation of her relationship with a divorced father and young sons, her flash forms offer little to no familiarity or predictability. While a lyric

personal narrative runs throughout the collection, it is more often interrupted by overhead dialogues, etymological definitions and excerpts from self-help books. Yet, for all her variety of hybrid forms, Carter never shoves the reader into her shoes and rarely abstracts herself out of the scene entirely. Rather, she maintains a cool remove from her more personal pieces, and often couches emotional confessions, longings and frustrations in other voices entirely. After admitting “I once bullied him into telling me had never loved Lori, his ex-wife”, Carter simply concludes “I have this book on narcissists. The first defining characteristic is an exaggerated sense of self-importance... I bought this book because I believed James to be a narcissist. It is called: *Help! I'm in Love with a Narcissist*” (17). Even when she states things in her own voice, she prefers to hint at what she declines to state outright.

The same can be said of her forays into hybrid hermit-crab forms, which allow Carter a space for vulnerability alongside distance and discretion. “*Steop*”, for instance, coolly charts the linguistic development of the term “step-mother” and “foster-parent” before ending with the astonishing conclusion “*Fester*: Of a wound or sore; to become a fester, to father or generate pus or matter, to ulcerate. *Festermodor*: a woman gathering pus.” Yet there is no explicit emotion within the piece’s brisk set of pages, the charged nature of its final lines a strange exception to academic interpretations and tidy set of footnotes. The same is inversely true for “My Mother Slew Me, My Father Ate Me”, a retold fairytale in which the true narrative hides in lengthy footnotes below. “Then she looked at him fiercely.” states the fable; “2. She looked at him this way because he never ate apple”, explains the footnote. “In fact, the only thing he ever did eat was white bread and pasta. She anticipated a struggle” (56). Carter refuses to leave herself space for melodrama unless it is merely implied.

Carter rarely inserts readers into other perspectives, but often does so for the sake of

projection. When her pieces use “you” it is nearly exclusively within a series of asides on the Roman empress Octavia. “But let’s be honest,” Carter urges in a theoretical dialogue, “You didn’t give the choicest cut of meat to Cleopatra’s son. Why would you?” (50). In Act II of *No Relation*, while reflecting on moving apart from her partner and the sons who were not her own, Carter asks of Octavia “Is this the difference in the love for a husband or a child? From one, you move on. Sometimes so easily it troubles you. From the other, you never do” (113). Carter’s indirect admissions are less like projection, or reader-insertion, inasmuch as they are a form of narrative ventriloquism; she places her own words into other people’s mouths, and lets the reader decide what to make of the space in between.

While the external trappings of Czerweic, Doyle, Chew-Bose, and Carter’s collections may vary, each of these works share a similar emotional weight: relationships beginning to end, hearts failing to beat, connections lost. How, then, do they keep the writing from crushing their readers? There are the relatively rapid or intriguingly long lengths, sure, but also precise measures of pacing, masks and side-paths that appear to help distract and direct our attentions. In the rare moments they compel readers to *feel* the enormity of the subject matter, an Atlantean unshouldering of burdens, the authors are mindful to keep such interludes brief and exactly crafted. They push the boundaries of our empathy without breaking into melodrama.

Each of these collections understand the essential need for space. For breath. As Director Hayao Miyazaki once said; “We have a word for that in Japanese. It’s called *ma*. Emptiness.” In the interview he claps his hands, just twice. “The time in between my clapping is *ma*. If you just have non-stop action with no breathing space at all, it’s just busyness.” And so these authors find nooks to hide in and hermit crabs to write, digress into purely physical sensations, write well-ordered lists that imply with every bullet point that which cannot be stated outright. They suggest

and list and hint and imply, bounce their voices across perspective and time, set the stage and place us within the center. Above all else, they help to ask Chew-Bose's central question of "Heart Museum": "[I]s there anything better, more truthful and sublime than what cannot be communicated?" (93).

Since my recent introduction to the field of creative nonfiction, I have struggled to reconcile my authorial appreciation for the genre and my Midwestern horror at the thought of oversharing. My family's first language is silence, and finding a way to write *through* this was of the central focuses of my thesis work. Each of these writers have offered key influences towards my approach: Carter taught me just how much weight a slim etymology can contain. Doyle's iron grip on authorial distance encouraged me to wield second person with intent, and both Czerweic and Chew-Bose convinced me to let other images and objects shoulder the weight of vulnerability on your behalf. And the startling economy of Carter's flash and Czerweic's "decants" have allowed me to attempt saying more with much less. The question of conveying what cannot be communicated is a lofty one, and I am certainly still far from answering it. But each of these writers' approaches have astonished, delighted and inspired my ongoing development of craft, and I hope that over the course of writing and researching this thesis I have grown that much closer to hitting the mark.

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Living Document

Of bodies chang'd to various forms, I sing. — Ovid

I am so busy. I am practicing my new hobby of watching me become someone else.

There is so much violence in reconstruction. — Jennifer Willoughby

Pointillism

This morning I woke, three hours into the new year, still drunk from the last one. First day of a new decade, windows down, cold fingers gripping the steering wheel, wind whipping still-glittery curls. Lingering headache from the night before. Driving down a long stretch of asphalt, striped with striated shadows of spindly trees. Pale winter flashes of light dark light dark light, a softly diffused strobe effect. It feels like driving through a bar code. I remember bar codes were originally circular, like a target, so they could be scanned from any direction. Wonder what driving inside them would be like. Can you drive straight into the bullseye? Or are you stuck forever on the outlying lines, like Saturn's rings, making meaningless rotations around a point you'll never reach?

The point is that I am always slowly circling the point, making my aimless way through mental cul-de-sacs and roundabouts. Thoughts never come head-on. Wasn't it said to tell the truth, but tell it slant? I've never had good hand-eye coordination and I'm not about to start shooting straight now.

An Ode

Sing to me muse, of chang'd forms. Of dual faces and many directions. Of bridges and doors, the paths we take and the paths we don't.

The Romans were obsessed with their traveling gods. Stone arches of Priapus would lurk lustily at the outskirts of town, little niches and alcoves to Apollo dotting the way. Apollo; the one god to remain Greek in the face of Romanization. Diana, Jupiter, Pluto, Venus, and yet, and yet — Apollo remains the same. Ditto Janus. Isn't it a wonder to remain unchanging? Among whole pantheons of double names and faces, of blended identities, to keep your name is a luxury. Emperors stole artwork and deities from those they conquered, Romanizing, romanticizing, absorbing them. They knew how to adapt to new places, new faiths.

How does a Roman know they're Roman?

So many towns, cities, countries, endlessly expanding outwards. Amorphous empires. Does a Roman remember their roots? Does every city become Rome in the aftermath, or is it merely a temporal term, a changing season? Is knowing your home an impossibility in the face of an empire's boundless borders? The question of a hundred deities contained in one pantheon, of a hundred cultures and countries and languages made manifest. Does a Roman feel out of place in Alexandria, Constantinople, Carthage? If all the empire is Rome, where does a Roman feel at home?

How It Starts

I once owned so many plants it made the local news. Very local, I should admit; the campus newspaper came to my dorm so a sweaty sophomore could snap pictures of me, curled on the couch, reaching forward to finger a pothos. The plant craze began pre-college, around the time most of the design world decided that houseplants were an excellent substitute for both children and personality traits.

Fresh faced and shaved-skulled, I'd walked into a nursery and asked for something that could defy both draught and shade. Something impervious to the elements. I needed that which I couldn't kill. I walked out with the standard snake plant, wavering spikes of waxy green arching up in sharp peaks, and the camel plant, which holds reservoirs of water in bulbous roots in the event of draught. The nursery employee, a blonde in Birkenstocks, assured me they were meant to endure. I took them both with me to college. And kept going.

My roommate and I bought more plants. And more. And more. We kept going to the local nursery on our weekends off, a mix of friendship and scholastic anxiety informing our need to focus on something, anything else. I drilled a hole in our ceiling to hang a glass bowl full of pothos, covered the screw in painters tape and useless Command strips on the off-chance of RA scrutiny. Our tables were flooded with philodendrons, a monstera perched upon our mini-fridge. We had to scoot the trio of succulents off the coffee table whenever friends would come over to study, which was often; our couch became something of a time-share for fellow freshmen, seeking refuge from their roommates. We had soft lamps, nice pillows, a bar cart's worth of mocktail mixings, and plants. Within a year, between four roommates and 500 square

feet, we shared 116 sprouts. We christened it The Greenhouse: the most oxygenated space on campus.

But sometimes; the engineers fretting over their calculations, grid paper dripping off the coffee table; the tinned screams of horror movies on our TV during scary movie screenings; hot chocolate rings around all our mugs on weekend nights when Bob Ross cooed over *happy little trees*. People pressing in, around, sinking into our sofa cushions and propping sneakers up besides the succulents. But sometimes; I couldn't breathe.

Crescit Eundo

New Mexico's motto translates to "It grows as it goes." A delight of a phrase, even if legislators threw their hands up at its Dr. Seuss-ical rhyme. It was suggested in 1882 from the epic Latin poem *De Rerum Natura* by Lucretius, describing a thunderbolt moving across the sky. From *crēscō*, to increase, rise, thrive, grow, multiply. *Eundo*, to transition. *Eundo* shares a root with *iānus*, "to go," which is where we get the name Janus. The two-faced Roman god, Roman deity of doorways, bridges, time. Called *Geminus*, Gemini, two-faced. To be two-faced is, according to Websters, "double-dealing" or "false." Also, delightfully; the name of a popular make-up brand.

He's so funny, Janus, the peculiar god with no body and two heads — as though the weight of all his dual cognition was too much for a body to have. Funny that the god of movement, of transition, of bridges and doorways and going through them has no means to do so himself. In nearly every sculptural representation, Janus exists exclusively as a bust. At crossroads you'd find columns of rock topped with twin faces, a self-symmetrical pillar. He goes where he's planted.

Diaspore

I'd never been any good at staying planted. Life had been minivans and moving vans and U-Hauls, criss-crossing interstates. Our family hopskotched up and down the north-east, chasing the futile hope of a father's happiness: we once spent half a year in North Carolina buying a house, the other half selling it. The next year we took a Route 66 road trip, crossing dust-bright New Mexico deserts and shimmering Texan asphalt. It was outside Waco that my sister and I found matching tumbleweeds. Effectively a dandelion fluff of dried twigs, we held them in our laps the whole way home so as not to crack a stem. In Florida we had a plant shelf in the living room. None of us had plants; we put the tumbleweeds up instead. They sat, sad tangles of tinder, besides the trunk door of my mother's old car blazoned with bumper stickers and stacked with old license plates. Frozen in place. I don't know what happened to them after we left.

North Carolina

I begged my mother for a lily of the valley plant, but she must've known it would die. It was a southern spring, wet asphalt already melting into clouds of steam, hazy roads and hazier afternoons. Our house sat like a protest on the end of an embryonic cul-de-sac, neighbors only to vacant construction lots glittering with broken glass and rusted nails. Our freshly-laid sod had only stayed neon green for a week, drying down to the bruised yellow crisp of families who couldn't afford to care. It made our FOR SALE sign really pop.

If you dug past the token pine mulch rimming the yard, you'd hit red Carolina sand. A little deeper, peach darkening to dried blood, and you'd reach gritty brown clay. Half sand, half loam, full of particulates. Inhospitable to any attempts towards domestication, only weeds seemed to like it. Our shrubs sat frozen in limbo, not quite dead but not quite alive. This was not a place to plant roots. We left before the frost came.

Their motto was *Esse quam videri*, "To be rather than to seem." I always hated that state.

Terra Rosa

It's famous in the south of France and northern Italy. There are two outstanding theories for the birth of terra rosa, that soft, sandy red clay in certain parts of the Mediterranean. The first: centuries of rain dissolved calcium carbonate, eroded the limestone into clay. The red comes from iron oxides: literally, rusting.

The second, more fantastic theory: over 12,000 - 25,000 years the wind blew sand onwards, across the Sahara. Settled down into sheltered coasts buffeted by wind and waves. Constant movement always keeps things rosy.

Epiphyte

It rained all the time in Florida. Bright wet mornings, sunlight shocking against damp grass, the air too humid to breathe. The asphalt would be baked dry by 10am. Then thunderstorms would come rumbling into place by afternoon, and everything would begin again. The trees were full of Spanish moss, tentacular tangles of dusty grey-green vines. They were a type of air plant no one had gotten excited about keeping in glass teardrop terrariums yet, but few people would care to keep wild Spanish moss. The vines were full of bugs, draped like lace across every good climbing tree in the neighborhood.

There were good trees — the best being a massive old oak, the size of the apartment, with gracefully bowed branches that trailed all the way to the ground. A ballerina in repose. You could hop a leg over and walk straight, like a balance beam, up to the center of the trunk where lizards lurked and the moss swayed. There would be masses of it on the ground, tendrils fallen into leaf litter and pine mulch, and if you flung it back up onto the tree it seemed perfectly content to keep growing. No roots at all, that I could see. Utterly self-sufficient. How freeing it must be, to live on air alone.

Homecoming Serf

Homecoming queen, not in my dreams

I'll be homecoming serf, it seems

but hey, it doesn't even bother me

we've moved away, and who needs royalty? — Sydney Gish

Nostalgia comes from νόστος, nóstos: the act of reaching a place, or returning, or going back, and ἄλγος, álgos, pain. Aching to return home, or aching to reach a place? Need it be familiar to have such an ache? Ulysses wanders without a home for so much of his life that it must have been strange to finally reach it. I have never had a home to reach. Where does my nostalgia go, then? For what would it ache?

Propagate

In college I learned how to grow cuttings in water. Ghost-pale tendrils, the suggestion of roots, swaying like jellyfish in jars. I gave cuttings to those who asked. Told them they would need to plant them soon. If you root a plant in water for too long, it'll never survive solid ground.

Polylectic

I did try to be sociable. Very hard, as a matter of fact. Freshmen year was a blur of names, a crash-course in community, in which the most important thing I learned was platonic plagiarism. How to memorize punchlines and senses of humor, candy preferences and movie tastes and phobias and shoe sizes and siblings and birthmarks. Catalogue when people laughed, when they didn't, when they cried, when they raged, when they just needed to get this damn paper over with. Replicate their responses when necessary, reflect their moods.

I had never been around so many people all at once before. I pinballed from dorm to dorm, group to group, gaining momentum as I ricocheted between social circles. Within and without and adjacent to, a line from Tennyson: *I am a part of all that I have seen*. Apart, a part. I think I am the space in between.

vocabulary lessons

art · ifice

clever or cunning devices or expedients, especially as used to trick or deceive others.

root of “artificial”

from the Latin artificium, based on ars, art- ‘art’ + facere ‘make’.

At its heart, to be artificial has always been to be a maker of art.

Repetition

Why do we knock copies? Why the shame of replication, of syntheticism? We should find no fault in artifice when it was good enough for the Romans. Some of the most stunning Greek sculptures of antiquity exist only in the form of Roman copies; Aphrodite of Knossos, Sleeping Hermaphroditus, The Wounded Boxer. There's something there about craft and copying. About building upon a prior body of work and making it better, or at least making it last a little longer. Something there, I think, about mimicry and repetition. Perhaps there is a value to be had in stating the same thing twice.

On Structure

You have to give the Romans credit for taking advantage of what they already had. Spolia and pantheons and whole centuries of development, ripe for the taking. Rome wasn't built in a day, but it wasn't built from the ground up either. It was hodge-podged together, stolen and shapeshifted, metamorphosed into an empire where it had once, simply, been a collection of disparate parts.

I bet the Romans would write great essay collections. Maybe I should ask Lucretius for help.

Sing to me, Lucretius, of collections well composed. Of wholes made greater by the sum of their parts, and works made better by the slapdash spolia surrounding them.

March 1st, 2017

“by 3:30 the weather advisories were in effect so I got dressed and went walking barefoot to the library to read on the field. Stared across the dead grass. Clouds moved fast overhead, lightning making split-second appearances in the distance. People moved in packs of 4 and 5 up and down the hill behind me, afraid to be alone. They whooped and howled and cheered, the sounds echoing across the desolate campus, and I felt the first drops of rain on my skin and thought *this isn't real*. A man jogged briskly backwards on the sidewalk to my left, a whistle clenched between bright white teeth, and I thought once more on how better writers would take all the all the broken shards of absurdist glass I had seen over the past 24 hours and compile them into a mosaic, something beautiful with a meaning. And then I didn't write it down.”

On Structure, II

I'm thinking about the Great Mosque of Cordoba in Spain. Almost all of it, funnily enough, Greco-Roman spolia stolen by the Umayyads. A cavernous hall of archway after archway, a stunning firmament of starry mosaics suspended above it all, and supported entirely by asymmetrical columns. Eight hundred and fifty-six columns. Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, jasper, onyx, marble, granite, porphyry. Some taller, some shorter, some wider and others skinnier. Nothing in common. And yet, and yet; they keep the stars in the sky.

Fractals

What can you know about a person? They shift in the light. You can't light up all sides at once.

Add a second light and you get a second darkness, it's only fair. — Richard Silken

A website with an all-white background and a copyright from 2008 tells me "While the fundamental nature of Janus is debated, in most modern scholars' view the god's functions may be seen as organized around a single principle: presiding over all beginnings and transitions, whether abstract or concrete, sacred or profane."

Which modern scholars are they? I need to know. I need to ask these modern scholars how they can possibly collate so many antonyms in one god, how they can reconcile so many opposites. Doesn't he tear himself apart? Doesn't he spend his days wondering, sat by dusty roads with no legs to walk upon, which head is the real one? Which face is the original? How can any single consciousness contain so many facets?

In my head, the modern scholars scoff. *The real question*, they tell me with their tweed blazers and handlebar mustaches and locally sourced craft IPAs, *is how you can possibly expect a god to contain any less?*

Tip-Toeing

Sometimes I think I do things to make a good picture. — Jenny Sadre-Orafai

One winter I submit an essay to my colleges writers' conference, whose organizers give a collective shrug and place me in a poetry workshop. It's a bitingly cold morning, bright pale light creeping through fogged windows. There are no heaters. A semi-circle of students squeeze into pale yellow desk-chairs radiating out from the chalkboard, still bundled in coats and scarves, as the poet holds court. I have written an essay about being kissed and feeling scripted, and the poet stares me down across the classroom.

Don't hide, he says. It's almost like you're creating little exits for yourself. So you don't have to commit to things.

I blink fast. Frigid fingers and a burning face. I describe the presumption of the person who kissed me, leaning away from their dictatorial hands, and say *It's an intentional artistic choice.*

He purses his lips. *Worry less about the writing as a thing you need to make pretty,* he instructs.

I nod politely and write his words down like scripture. I look like a good student. I am very good at making things look pretty.

Eidolon

It's Monday morning just after 9:40am, May 1st, bright snatches of sunlight and flashing metal and shirt-wet sweat for the patrolman in the midst of it all directing traffic in the New York City spring, and John Morrissey hasn't looked up yet — why would he? — but when he does he'll see a slip of sky, a little ribbon of white clouds, the white scarf floating dreamily down from on high and he will remember this later, when the officers ask, before the sound exploded out from the street corner and passerby began to scream. Before the photography student comes running to the sound of smashing metal and takes the shot.

Life Magazine runs the shot as "Picture of The Week." A full black and white spread of 23 year old Evelyn McHale. She looks asleep, her gloved hand curling like a comma at the neck, clutching a strand of pearls. Her legs are crossed at the ankle, one pale foot poking from a tangle of stockings that seem to have ripped on the way down. She's crushed into the roof of a United Nations limousine parked on 34th Street, the warped metal sunk like sheets around the weight of her. Her head rests on a pillow of shattered glass.

Evelyn had been dead for four minutes before the picture. She had fallen 1050 feet; her insides were effectively liquefied but externally, perfect. Within days, Evelyn McHale became "The Most Beautiful Suicide." No one knew she'd left a note begging to be cremated, pleading not to be seen or remembered. I didn't know she had a fiancé she dreaded marrying; that her divorced mother had seven children and undiagnosed depression; that when the police came to move her body, she fell apart in their hands.

All I knew was what I saw: A woman unhappy enough to die and yet, still beautiful.

smudge-proof, long-lasting!

I find the Life Magazine page in my first semester of college, when I still struggle to keep a uniform of perfect red lipstick and winged eyeliner no matter the time of day. I maintain makeup homeostasis with a religious zeal, reapplying eyeliner at 2am in library bathrooms with frigid fingers while I struggle to remember French conjugations. The “look” I am known for is a holdover from a high school gig in a hair salon, spent sitting behind a desk with floor-to-ceiling windows besides me and a flatscreen-sized mirror behind me. Packs of pedestrians would peer into the windows; I’d smile sunnily from behind the glass. Inside was a funhouse of ever-changing mirrors along every wall. Pixelated flashes of myself would follow me from every angle.

The mirrors were strategic, of course — a salon’s income and art form is appearance. The hairstylists themselves had the physically irreverent work ethic of starving artists and the obsessive self-monitoring of hardened models. They came in two hours early to blow-dry their hair, wax their eyebrows, spent hours searching for the slightest wrinkles of skin and bemoaned finally finding them with a martyred delight. One of them had two children and perfect smile lines besides her eyes. She stuck scotch tape along her temple to pin the skin back.

The salon taught something about the recitation, the practice, the perfectionism. Of worrying how your chin looks from every angle. How you look from the side. From the back. Down the arch of your spine.

Once, I ducked into the office to find the owner with a syringe stabbing into her skin. Her friend had come by to offer in-house Botox injections. “Maybe you should get one!” she laughed, her lips rigid. The mirrors behind her reflected those behind me: an infinite echo of

her tossed hair, tanned cheeks. I laughed, and watched hundreds of red lips smile silently behind her.

At 110 calories per ounce, this works out to 0.88 calories per Host

Did you know there are extinct mental disorders? *Anorexia mirabilis* was a different creature than our prettily packaged, slickly-socialized anorexia nervosa. *Mirabilis* was characterized by a divine lack of hunger, a fasting of faith. Nuns and saints and martyrs who claimed belief was all their bodies needed to sustain them. Angela of Foligno would take it even more literally; eating the scabs of the poor and sick. She claimed it was “sweet as the Eucharist.” Modern minds scoff and wince at the thought, but isn’t the Eucharist meant to be the body of Christ anyway? The body and blood? It seems like Angie was only pursuing a purer faith. But what do I know, I’m a sinner.

By next winter I need the sweet suppedaneum relief of flats, but must wear the heels for work. They go on at 7am and I walk miles every day, wincing at the weight of each step, suddenly incapable of the brisk, distinctive “strut” so many people have remarked upon. They don’t come off ‘till midnight, when I peel off my tights and high-waisted pants, unbelt the constricting skirts. I wake every morning and fall asleep every night with a dull line of pain bisecting my stomach. A certain hollowness; is it hunger or sickness? I can never tell if I need food or a fast. So I choose neither, and sip from a mug of moscato till sleep overtakes me. Something like a college-aged communion.

I don’t know of gods but I know of belief and bodies, belief *in* bodies. That fascinating intersection of faith and physicality: the divine and the mundane. I believe I will get up in the morning, so I do. I walk miles and don’t wince. I bite my lips until they bleed and wear the redness as a gloss. It’s cheaper than Sephora.

The nuns and priests and martyrs and princesses claimed their fasting gave them heights of ecstatic faith; bright eyed and thin-boned, sustained by sheer, blinding love. Just as the most beautiful muses of the 1800's were those with pale skin, silky hair. Sparkling eyes, rosy cheeks, red lips — all symptoms of tuberculosis. Middle class women would powder their skin and redden their lips to “emulate the consumptive appearance.”

Consumptive, consumed, devoured. Bodies and blood and Eucharist. Perhaps beauty is always death made delicate.

On Rivers

In some stories, *lover* and *river* are synonymous. Coleridge claims Alph, *the stately river ran, through caverns measureless to man, into a sunlit sea*, but he ran in more ways than one. The god loved the nymph Arethusa — “love,” of course, being as debatable a translation as any part of Greek myth can be — and chased her. Young and desperate and damp with sweat, with tears, with fear, she sprinted till the cup of her body ran over and she became a freshwater spring. So Alph flowed his river into hers, tears and tides mixing into brackish bodies indelibly conjoined. Linked and locked into place. Even now, the river runs through the spring. Rivers will dig themselves into furrows and caverns and paths we’re helpless to follow. *Love* is a word like *river* is a verb: There is nothing still in either word.

Locks

And yet: I'm told rivers are romantic. Show me the city and I'll find you the bridge littered with lovelocks. Some silver, utilitarian and sturdy, occasionally Sharpied with a date. Many the ubiquitous pink and red hearts, requiring a three-digit combination to undo. The more traditional have a classic golden body, silver neck, keyhole on the bottom. Two keys, one for each lover, to fling overboard into the river below as a show of romantic conviction. The winter I spent walking through Europe and signing my postcards to the boy with kisses seemed full of locks: I found them on snowy bike-strewn walkways in Amsterdam, above art-nouveau railings in Paris – but not many. The Pont Des Arts bridge was once covered in locks until their combined weight tore down a railing. Now they're (theoretically) banned. I hadn't known promises could be heavy enough to sink themselves even in this, the city of love.

That Winter

was spent trying to chart the inlets and spaces I'd carved for the boy to fill, predict the remaining shape I'd take when the river ran dry. Was it romantic or cartographic? Being a lover felt like an entirely new coastline, a freshly discovered continent of self. The boy claimed *love isn't a feeling, it's a verb*. Pessoa said *to give your love is to lose love*. Arethusa could have told me that to love is to erode.

Pygmalion

Next summer we are in Ljubljana and out of love, walking across the Butcher Bridge littered with lovelocks and fairytale charm. Later my friend Anja will take us to the Museum of Modern Art, to the city's only rooftop bar, to a hole-in-the-wall noodle stand. We'll eat our boxed lunches in Prešeren square, sitting on the steps of the candy-pink Franciscan church as a bubble artist delights children and tourists. The bubbles will catch in his curls. We'll watch old-timers sitting beside the public recycling bins, drinking from wine bottles with amiable smiles. Cool faced teenagers perching atop the monument to the city's infamous poet, France Prešeren. He devoted all his illustrious work to Julija Primic – a woman who had never loved him in the first place. Anja will point out the bare-breasted woman wreathed in ivy, draped above the monument; *That's Julija*. Locked into place. I wish Julija could tell me how it feels to have a poet mythologize his life at the cost of hers.

Ljubljana

We are in Slovenia for a two week poetry seminar, a collection of vaguely artistic undergrads cutting each other on our collective edges. We spend our days apathetically writing and passionately day drinking, sitting at the patio tables in the courtyard with a sprawl of notebooks and ashtrays, bruise-blackish red nail polish and thick ink pens, phones full of the music and astrology apps sensitive poetry students are so inclined to downloading. The boy is a Gemini: the twins. I am a Pisces: two fish curled into a loop, tip-to-tail. A water sign. The stories say Cupid and Venus were once transformed into fish and fled to a seaside cave. Held one another's fins between their lips so they couldn't be separated. Hence Pisces, the permanent piscine loop of love and teeth.

Later I'll watch the sun hit the green-gold waves of Ljubljanica, the dinner boats coasting by with their wide-eyed retinue of well-fed tourists, the local's motorboats and barges gilded picturesque in the light, and wonder how many keys rust to nothing in the water below. I think about metallic particulates freely floating through city bloodstreams, red bleeding into soil, swallowed by the few remaining fish. Living on in bodies, willing or unwilling. Love is high iron intake, and I come from a long line of anemic women.

Ironic

It's not that we're bad at getting married or grilling steaks, per se. We're excellent cooks.

My mother used to make bacon-wrapped scallops, sea-sweet brine wrapped in still more salt, and he would gorge on them until his lips were slick with grease. I'd have a couple. My sister would have fewer. My mother would eat a salad. What's the point of iron-riches if you can't share them? We've always set the table and found our nutrients elsewhere. Like everything in our house, it was a delicate process: my sister laying out placemats with careful fingers, a coaster by the head of the table for his beer. I'd line the silverware in neat rows, silver slick reflections staring back at myself. Wide-eyed and sweaty-handed. Waiting for the garage door to come shuddering up with a metallic groan, his truck pulling into the drive. Waves of anxiety rippling through the house, freezing us where we stood. It was easier if we didn't eat much, left room in our mouths for his words.

On good days it was a simple call and response, a chorus of his echoes: *Work is full of morons. Oh, they're fools not to appreciate you. Where does he get off saying something like that? I'm so sorry. Why do you all say sorry so fucking much? We're sorry.*

O Iphigenia

The stories say Agamemnon was a hero, destined to win the Trojan War, but first his ships needed the wind. Calchas instructed him to slaughter his daughter Iphigenia, bleed her on the altar in exchange for full sails. Pinned into place, helpless to his hands, Agamemnon flashed the knife down to find — a deer. Artemis had taken pity on the girl, let her ankles dip to hooves and slip from their ropes. Wide-eyed and velvety she ran away, or was flown away by the resultant wind, and lived her days out in the forest.

I think about the ropes on her ankles. A psychologist named Walker posited a fourth form of trauma response: fight, flight, freeze, fawn. Fawn as in listen, look wide-eyed and sympathetic, let them get what they want until you can run to the woods with a thrumming heart and desperate hooves. Iphigenia could've told me daughters don't need gods to become deer.

Ironic, II

Later, after he'd fallen back in love with the last girl and I stopped kissing postcards, the boy would sit at my coffee table littered with unused coasters and fold his arms. Pin me with bright cold eyes. The room so empty his body felt loud. *Do you consider me your enemy?* No, of course not, how could I? *You've been distant for a friend, lately.* I'm so sorry. *Why are you sorry?* I sat still and sweet, quivering quiet until he laughed. Until I could move.

On Rivers, II

Love is like a river: The stories say Narcissus fell into both when he caught his reflection. I always thought Echo was a river nymph, a naiad, who clung to Narcissus' side as he slipped ever closer to his watery reflection. It would explain why she cried so much. But she was an oread, made of the mountains and solid in her actions. Her heart sunk like a pebble in a pond. She cried until her limbs turned to river rock, her voice no longer her own, his words echoing back from the freshly-carved space between her ribs. Echo could have told me the verb is water on stone, tears on cheeks, someone else's words burrowed cold in your throat. Iron in your blood.

Dizzy

Anemia isn't noticeable save for cold fingers and how, when you stand up too quickly, the world doesn't always come with you. Swirling wildly beneath you, impossible to find your footing until the head rush fades. It's like Acqua Alta in winter, when Venice sinks a little lower in her slumber and the city rushes to erect catwalks above the water, bridges above bridges, thin planks of wood. You have to pay perfect attention when the boards are submerged, or you'll take a step forward and find only water. Tourists do it every winter, stepping off into

Found Footing

You have to focus, be careful, step lightly. To make a wrong step or say the wrong word is to plunge unsuspecting; water closing over your head. Heart burning in your chest. Once I was clumsy; now I am very good at tiptoeing. It is easy to be changed.

Acqua Alta is a manmade construct, I am told. The city never used to flood. Then the oil drills off the coast dug too deep, too greedy, unmoored the tidal patterns. Eroded the coastline. Now the sea claims Venice every winter, and more and more Venetians flee to live on the mainland. It is too expensive, they say, too crowded, flooded with tourists and water damage. It is impossible to find solidity in a city that sinks ever deeper beneath your feet. But still, Venetians stay. Still call *La Serenissima* their home, “most serene.” They know still waters hide deep tides.

The mayor still throws a ring into the canals every year to renew the city’s vows to the water, and I wonder where they all go. Do they rust like the keys? It’s funny, that Venice outlawed lovelocks across the city but still fling their rings into the waves. Of course, it’s not the water they’re worried about but the bridges — lovelocks were cut off the Ponte Vecchio for fear of structural damage. Venice has enough weight dragging her down.

My friend Thomas tells me it’ll be fully submerged in our lifetime. I imagine tourists diving down to see it, a city still thriving regardless of the waterline. Shopkeepers hooked up to oxygen tanks, holding blown glass up to watery sunlight. Mainlanders shaking their heads, *Why don’t they leave?* But *love*, the verb is too much stillness and saltwater. It’s a form of running water that holds no movement. Sometimes, if you’ve stayed long enough, it’s easier to sink than swim.

Metamorphoses

They're forced in death to be the thing that attracted the violence. – Jia Tolentino

Do you consider me your enemy? In his eyes I could see the snakes sprouting from my scalp. Are there truly no other roles to play than gorgon or goddess? Why does no one ask Medusa how it felt to watch a man turn to stone?

Picturesque

It is sunset in the Medici Gardens, godfingers of light slanting between the clouds, gilding the edges of the Spanish Steps in sharp relief. Couple after couple stand in front of the railing — their backs to the view — and flick out front-facing cameras or commandeer well-intentioned bystanders to take pictures for them.

I am usually that exact kind of well-intentioned bystander who will walk up and offer to take the picture but this summer I sit, huddled into the corner of white stone railing, with a bag of chips and a bottle of sharp white wine. Hair a nimbus of greasy, unwashed curls and face bare, save lipstick, in a sort of protest. Today is meant to be mine.

I know the picture I make is a strange one, and this above all else delights me. Behold the female gargoyle, a modern Gorgoneia. All shall look upon my messy curls, my bottle of wine with lipstick on the rim, all the couples shall give furtive glances and clutch a little bit closer to their boyfriends and selfie sticks. They shall fear. They will be grateful not to be me, I think delightedly, sinking my shoulders deeper into my jacket, and I will be grateful not to be them.

Then a man — youngish, red turtleneck and bright eyes — walks over with roses from the street vendor and says, “Have a good night, beautiful.” Kisses my cheek and walks away.

I stare, wild-eyed, after him. Scattered by the thought of how terribly my image and his words align. Check hair and my lipstick, fret over the lack of foundation so daringly skipped that morning, when I’d been determined to dedicate the day to myself. Before I’d known I’d be recast as the young ingenue in need of romantic encouragement. It was kind of him — wasn’t it? — but frustrating. I wish I’d had time to rehearse.

Halophyte

From the first time you set foot on a vaporetto in Venice and feel the floor rock beneath your feet you feel some indelible shift in balance, the way you move. When I go to sleep that first night in my hostel bunk, I am still floating. Can still feel the rock and sway of the water beneath my sheets. The feeling persists even on land; if I'd closed my eyes as I walked across the gangway to the mainland, I cannot imagine being able to perceive the moment I reached solid pavement. To be fair, it's certainly not terra firma; if anything, the firmest land you reach in Venice is still terra acqua.

And yet. Stepping across a canal and turning a corner in simmering June heat, I found a massive tree in an otherwise perfectly empty square by a dock. Some hundred years old, three stories tall, and all I could do was stare. How can trees grow in Venice? Do the roots break through to the pylons below, adapt to the brackish salt? Can an oak become a mangrove? Is the dock weaker or stronger for it?

Dendrochronology

Sophocles said “All we who live, live / as ghosts of ourselves. Shadows in passing,” and I’d argue that just to live is to be unfaithful to the self you once were. By virtue of breathing, of thinking, we are undoing the selves that once were.

Every cell of our body is completely replaced within a 7 year cycle. Technically, my father has never met me.

Revisions

Many are the shapes of what's divine. — Euripides

Robert Montgomery claims “The people you love become ghosts inside of you and like this you keep them alive”. Of course he writes, of course he’s right, because sometimes the only way to keep a feeling or moment or memory alive is that strange necromantic romance of language. Heartbeats spelling dots and dashes. Sometimes we shouldn’t keep our past alive, which is why I’ll put my blinders on as my old self walks past, walk fast, laugh a little too hard at a joke, avoid eye contact.

There is a skill to pretending not to see a person, the same way there is a skill to not admitting your own past, to not admitting what came before you and makes up the seemingly solid ground beneath your feet.

Why the obsession with my own cause and effect? What is it about knowing what comes after that makes me want to understand what happened before? To dig deep? Maybe all I’ve ever had was terra aqua.

Why do my friends laugh at that show when the character says “I’m really interested in plagiarism as an art form”? Isn’t so much of culture, of history, throughout time but most critically now, an endless revisionist riff on what came before us? Why is this a punch line when it’s a fact we’d rather not look in the eye?

And so history does what I do when I spot the slouch of an ex-lover headed towards me in my peripherals: walk a little faster, avoid eye contact, and laugh too hard at someone else’s joke.

Agriculture & Commerce

Chattanooga is not a water city. There are three bridges across the water, too far above to feel the ebb of the tides. You can look across the bridges and see its rapids, the ripple and swell of fast-moving tides. But you can't feel the water under your feet unless you're lucky, unless the river swells its banks, and the docks at the base of the aquarium flood up over the cement. Rows of half-submerged streetlights shining like lighthouses above the water. There are little plastic jetties here and there, by the riverboat restaurant, and at night if you move fast and quick you can jump aboard, step lightly across the waves seemingly tied to nothing but themselves, and you can feel the ripple while the cars race across the bridge above you. Tail lights leaving contrails in their wake. Here, everything moves in straight lines.

After Slovenia I went looking for locks. Surely, I thought, surely they'd be here. This city so proud of its bridges. The clinical concrete parkway was out from the start; too long and unforgivably hot to house romance, and no rails small enough for locks besides. The old metal bridge was a thought; people liked to climb the grates above the cars to take pictures, and there were plenty of odd surfaces for pigeons and pining couples to claim. But no dice. Finally, the wooden pedestrian walkway: home to street buskers and birdwatchers, out-of-towners and an endless stream of photoshoots. I conscript my friend Olive into the search with me. We dodge the dog walkers and Segway tours, eyes on the curvilinear iron sides. She finds one. A single iron padlock, heavy duty, locked about halfway down the bridge besides the informational plaque about Tennessee's wetland trees. No code, no heart, no cutesy message. We count our win, and keep walking.

Off the bridge, down the slope of the city park, headed for the water. We duck around a parking lot, turn a corner, and find the keys.

The chain link fence is backed with green vinyl mesh, an attempt at privacy for whatever lies behind, but it's secondary to the hundreds upon hundreds of keys. House keys, car keys, safety deposit box keys and yes, of course, lock keys. Keys with novelty patterns, with silicone grips, with sports teams and animal faces emblazoned across the top. Keys with circular bases, triangular bases, diamonds and squares and the occasional trapezoid. Keys with no edges, keys with broken-off edges, keys tied to the barbed wire above the fence itself. Keys with names inked on them. Keys dripping rust. I find one rusted to nothing on the asphalt below, red staining my fingers. It won't hook back on the fence. I slip it in my pocket and feel weightless.

We theorize as we follow the fence, counting keys. Public art project? Secret society? Impromptu memorial? Not all of the words written are names; this can't just be for romance. A car zooms by, brakes hard, rolls down the window and calls Olive's name. The girl is a friend of a friend of a boyfriend, with stick and pokes on her knuckles and dark roots poking through white-blonde. A curly-haired boy in a beanie rides shotgun, sloe-eyed and silent. She asks what we're up to; Olive explains. Behind her the river flows fast, the cars speed faster, and the boy stays mute besides her.

Oh wow, she says, craning across the dash to look through the passenger window. I always thought they were locks.

Commonplace Book

ON AUTOVOUYERISM:

“I am so busy. I am practicing my new hobby of watching me become someone else. There is so much violence in reconstruction. Every minute is grisly, but I have to participate. I am building what I cannot break.” — Jennifer Willoughby, *The Sun is Still a Part of Me*

“To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a subliminal murder... a soft murder.” — Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

“A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. [...] One might simplify this by saying: Men act and women appear. Men look at woman. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object — and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.” — John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

“Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? [...] Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur.” — Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride*

“Sometimes / I do things because I think it makes a good picture.” — Jenny Sadre-Orafai, *Paper Cotton Leather*

“Women’s beauty is seen as something separate from us, something we owe but never own: We are its stewards, not its beneficiaries. We tend it like a garden where we do not live.” — Jess Zimmerman, “The Monstrous Beauty of Medusa”

“The first feminist gesture is to say: ‘Ok. They’re looking at me. But I’m looking at them.’ The act of deciding to look, of deciding that the world is not defined by how people see me, but by how I see them.” — Agnès Varda, “Filming Desire”

“The domestic, in other words, is ultimately more concerned with seeming than with being: it is a place where personal ideals are externalized or personal failures made visible.” — Rachel Cusk, *Coventry*

“When the muse happens also to be an artist, the struggle is existential, because to submit entirely to musedom, to being seen rather than seeing, would be to lose art itself.” — Zadie Smith, “Self Portrait by Celia Paul”

ON JANUS:

“Art is double, or it isn’t art. [...] Art objects are meant to play many roles; if they play fewer, it is because of a limited eye that imprisons them from possibility.” — Adam Gopnik, *At the Strangers’ Gate*

“AITKEN: Is the range of the work that you do—poetry, essays, opera, academic work, teaching—a way of trying to punch windows in the walls of the self?”

CARSON

No. I would say it's more like a way to avoid having a self by moving from one definition of it to another. To avoid being captured in one persona by doing a lot of different things." — Anne Carson, "The Art of Poetry No. 88"

"What can you know about a person? They shift in the light. You can't light up all sides at once. Add a second light and you get a second darkness, it's only fair. He is looking at the wall and I am looking at his looking." — Richard Silken, *Portrait of Fryderyk in Shifting Light*

"My God, my God, whose performance am I watching? How many people am I? Who am I? What is this space between myself and myself?" — Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

"Many are the shapes of what's divine." — Euripides, *Bakkhai*, trans. by Reginald Gibbons & Charles Segal

"I am afraid of splitting, splitting, fragmenting. If I yield, I can yield to an infinite. I can yield to so many... And it is all a devouring." — Anais Nin, *Nearer the Moon: The Previously Unpublished Unexpurgated Diary*

"THE COPY ALWAYS CARRIES ITS MAKING WITH IT." — Theron Jacobs, "Untitled"

"You're always more unreal to yourself than other people are." — Marguerite Dumas, *Practicalities*

"Forget heroin. Just try giving up irony, that deep-down need to mean two things at once, to be in two places at once, not to be there for the catastrophe of a fixed meaning." — Edward St. Aubyn, *At Last*

ON HUNGER:

“Suffering feels religious if you do it right.” — Chelsea Hodson, “The End of Longing”,
Tonight I’m Someone Else: Essays

“Tonight, I will never be holy or concave / enough. Is this party over soon? I cannot
resume a sense of gratitude / —not with this body I’m crawling in.” — Aria Aber, “Creation
Myth”, *Halal If You Hear Me*

“All I know of love is hunger.” — Mary Lambert, “How I Learned to Love”, *Shame Is an
Ocean I Swim Across*

“She catches sight of herself in the reflective side of the toaster, and, suddenly confronted
with the image of what she is doing, she retches into the sink. The shame of being caught
desiring, even by herself. [...] And, really, wasn’t my shame at eating alone about the shame of
being witnessed, being caught desiring, too? To be witnessed wanting, and then to witness the
capacity of your own appetite.” — Laura Maw, “There’s Nothing Scariest Than a Hungry
Woman”

“If male artists sometimes stage dramas of power, it is not unknown for female artists to
make a performance of masochism. Neither performance should be entirely trusted.” — Zadie
Smith, “Self Portrait by Celia Paul”

ON MONSTROSITY:

“Who hasn’t ever wondered: am I monster or is this what it means to be a person?” — Clarice
Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*

“The she-monster is hardly a new phenomenon. The idea of a female untamed nature
which must be leashed or else will wreak havoc closely reflects mythological heroes’ struggles

against monsters. Greek myth alone offers a host - of Ceres, Harpies, Sirens, Moirae. Associated with fate and death in various ways, they move swiftly, sometimes on wings; birds of prey are their closest kin - the Greeks didn't know about dinosaurs - and they seize as in the word raptor. But seizure also describes the effect of the passions on the body; inner forces, looser, madness, arte, folly, personified in Homer and the tragedies as feminine, snatch and grab the interior of the human creature and take possession." — Marina Warner, "Monstrous Mothers", *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time*

"Draw a monster. Why is it a monster?" — Janice Lee, *Daughter*

"One of the things I always found so painful and so oddly true about all these transformations is that they all get turned into beautiful things. [...] They're forced in death to be the thing that attracted the violence. [...] It makes preverbal sense to me. Beauty both conceals the cruelty of it and also makes it so much more visible." — Jia Tolentino, "The Brutality of Ovid"

"Godhood is just / like girlhood: / a begging to be believed." — Kristin Chang, "Churching"

ON CRAFT:

"[The] ambition is not to be understood outright, but to return to an original peg. To share without betraying whatever mechanism individuates him or her. Perhaps that's what we call our disposition. How becoming is multipart, but mainly a pilgrimage inward. If you share too much of yourself, you risk growing into someone who has nothing unacknowledged." — Durga Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood*

“The woman of the future, Woolf says, will devise her own kind of sentence, her own form, and she’ll use it to write about her own reality. ... Stumblingly, Woolf hazards a guess that a ‘female’ literature will be shorter, more fragmentary, interrupted ‘for interruptions there will always be... Woman is filled with visions and yearnings that are never matched by reality; she has a power of visualization, of imagination, that her lack of worldly power forever frustrates. Yes, she might produce literature out of this conflict in her being. But she is more likely to produce silence.” — Rachel Cusk, *Coventry*

“You hold on really tight until you’re forced to learn to let go of the ideas you had about yourself. You learn you are a mercurial human being and never and always and declarations change.” — Chloe Caldwell, *I’ll Tell You in Person*

NON-FICTION:

I’ll Tell You in Person: Essays — Chloe Caldwell

No Relation — Paula Carter

Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays — Durga Chew-Bose

Coventry — Rachel Cusk

Fluid States — Heidi Czerweic

The Wet Engine — Brian Doyle

Trick Mirror — Jia Tolentino

Things I Don’t Want to Know — Deborah Levy

The Cost of Living — Deborah Levy

As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh — Susan Sontag

The Empathy Exams — Leslie Jamison

CRAFT:

First You Write a Sentence — Joe Moran

The Rose Metal Guide to Flash Nonfiction — Dinty W. Moore

Making Shapely Fiction — Jerome Stern

The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology — Phillip Lopate

To Show and to Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction — Phillip Lopate

FICTION:

Green Girl — Kate Zambreno

The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis — Lydia Davis

The Hour of the Star — Clarice Lispector

The Friend: A Novel — Sigrid Nunez