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Identidem, and other lyric essays

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Heavy Wrestling of the Dialectical: Naming and Newness in the Lyric Essay

Walking home from 8th grade one day, I remember standing on the sidewalk and getting told by a friend to download Skype and add them as soon as I got home. My days quickly turned into two, with the daylight hours devoted to school and sleep afterwards, living the normal life twice as quick, while the moonlight hours were devoted to the internet, to increasingly ritualistic voice calls and texts with my friends, learning new names to call each other, new labels to call ourselves, and new ways, simply put, to engage with this hellish pubescent existence. I didn't care about being bullied at school anymore. At night, I had people who get me, who knew the real me.

I was probably the last year of children to not get a cell phone before high school. The only reason I even had one by 9th grade was because my sister, still in middle school, begged hard enough for the two of us. I didn't really care about new stuff until my sister did, during which I decided that it was unfair for a younger sibling, albeit by one year, to get some new freedom first. So, you can imagine what it was like to unlock this first private ability of discussion as a young teen, in a world and body that is changing so fast. I learned everything about myself from these midnight talks. I was straight, then pansexual, bisexual, biromantic heterosexual, cis, nonbinary, trans, cis nonbinary. The labels nailed down some essence of me that was lost the next day, but for a moment, I was seen. I had something to call myself.

This evasive love of labels continues into the present. I am pretty confident of what I am, at least pretty confident that the question of what label I am can be left to deep talks at parties or philosophical discussions over coffee, not to social media bios or survey questionnaires. But as I write, I find myself once again obsessed with this idea of taxonomy, that to share what we love, we must first dissect it and pin it down. We can overcome so much through love, but it does not seem we can overcome language. In the years since I have started my undergraduate degree, I have found that, if we must use language to share ideas, then the language I will use to describe my writing is the “lyric essay.”

Anne Boyer, 2020 Pulitzer Prize Winner in General Nonfiction, starts a blog post earlier this year, “I don’t fuck with the term ‘lyric essay.’ Its gross congealment of two messy, non-parallel terms is reason enough to stay away.” She argues multiple charges throughout the post—that the idea of the lyric essay ignores historical hybrid compositions like prosimetra, that it leaves out poems with qualities of the essay, or that all it does is “loud-signal the neoliberal creative writing program’s attempted rationalization of literary production.” All of this in the first paragraph.

Anne Boyer loves the lyric essay. She writes, “Yet I am a fan of much of the work on which the unfortunate appellation of "lyric essay" is bestowed.” But here, she spends her time not fighting the work, but the label. I agree with most of her charges, and I acknowledge the form she’s writing in: blog writing is casual, shocking on occasion, and it usually just wants to start the conversation for the sake of discussion, not yet for the sake of some critical, correct opinion. But I don’t believe in fighting the terms other people use for themselves, for their own writing.

For the lyric essay, it is a moderately recently term. It’s been around for a few decades, and it has been popular for less. The term, most simply, can be defined by reading the term. A

lyric essay is an essay that is also lyric, and not vice-versa. But if you like the lyric essay, you probably don't care for simple. Any definition that tries to get closer to the truth of the lyric essay also gets further. John D'Agata, in his introduction to *We Might As Well Call It the Lyric Essay*, calls the lyric essay "no less an example of lipstick on a pig" (6). In the whole of his introduction, he does not define the lyric essay once. He writes a lot about how people dislike the term. He also writes a lot about how people dislike his nonfiction book for not being nonfiction. In one sense, John D'Agata shows that Anne Boyer is adding to the tradition of criticism for the lyric essay by stating her love for the work and hate for the name. In another, D'Agata shows the personal lens that criticism of creative nonfiction takes, even if he doesn't get the benefits Boyer does from the blog post as a form. He is somewhat self-righteous in his ideas for this being the introduction of an anthology. D'Agata, as one of the most popular—or well-known at least—names in creative nonfiction, if not in lyric essays for his work in the *Seneca Review*, shows the doublethink nature of the essay. Some essayists want the benefits of the restrictions of truth without acknowledging that the benefits cannot be dissolved from the truth.

The closest D'Agata gets to a definition of the lyric essay is by stating what he has included in the anthology of lyric essays: "This is an anthology about the beautiful gangly breadth of this unnameable literary form, and how nomenclature, while often limiting, polarizing, inadequate, and always stupid, can also be the thing that opens up our genre to new possibilities and new paths of inquiry" (9-10). The lyric essay, to D'Agata, is a term that pits itself against its work, but he recognizes that the restrictions of naming the lyric essay help move the lyric essayist along. I can agree with him here, even if his base opinions about the essay cannot be trusted, even if he doesn't recognize how the restrictions of truth, just like the restrictions of taxonomy, help move the essayist along.

As we can see with D'Agata, there is some wrestling with the form done in the lyric essay. Like all products of the world, there is some truth and deceit in our knowledge—some of this wrestling is fruitful, and some of it leads to dead ends. But that just means we continue forward, knowing more than we did before we decided to engage with the page. As an essayist, it is my duty to remind the reader that all an essay is is an attempt at truth. It is in the name, coming from the Old French *essai* ("trial") and the Late Latin *exagium* ("weighing").

My work in this collection shows a wrestling, both in subject and execution. I have left the wrestling of craft for this introduction, but "Identidem" and the other lyric essays are attempts to pin down the elusiveness of identity. In the title essay, I ask what we find in the signified by investigating the signifier. Just like we investigate, and interrogate, the term "lyric essay," I ask myself "what can I gain from going down the path of investigating my own labels?" The Ship of Theseus was the first inspiration for this work, and using it as a lens, I have been able to see the way in which labels complicate that which they seek to clarify. What happens when you call a different ship by the same name? What happens when you call the same person by a different name? "Identidem" finds the path that links all things to their past, no matter how much you want to avoid them.

This complication of labels, of names, of identity, causes me to push against the idea, but that only works inwardly. I am comfortable with what I am, no matter what I call it. Especially if I don't call it anything. But still, we cannot overcome language. If I want to share with you anything about my experience, I must learn the song. Most people I know take a simple approach like D'Agata when it comes to the label. We might as well call ourselves queer. Not usually because it is good, but because it is better than the alternatives. What if we look slightly deeper? This does not mean forgoing the label in totality but instead asking ourselves, especially those of

us who are young queers, what goes into a name. In my essay, "On the Use of Slurs," I start my mediation on this question. When calling ourselves names, what do we avoid for our comfort? And what do we avoid for others' comfort? Return to the lyric essay, this is a term I've only ever avoided for the comfort of others. The term, as we see with Boyer, can invoke the ire of the reader. For those who don't study the craft, it can even be off-putting. But I would argue that that is all the reason to lean into it. At a minimum, we won't find a better term by leaving what we have, we must study the lyric essay, understand what works about the term and what doesn't, before we can move forward. That is, assuming that we even must move away from it. I've found that the more defined the lyric essay becomes, and generally speaking, the more work we do in taxonomy for creative-nonfiction, the more it coalesces.

When Randon Billings Noble collected the anthology *A Harp in the Stars*, she was choosing to lean into the form, specifically because of this elusiveness:

> Lyric essays require a kind of passion, a commitment to weirdness in the face of convention, a willingness to risk confusion, a comfort with outsider status. When I'm writing a lyric essay, I'm not worried about what it is or what to call it. But when I started teaching lyric essays, I needed to put words to the form, to try to define it, to make it at least a little more accessible and understandable—even as I kept running into contradictions in my own thinking. Sometimes I enjoyed the lyric essay's elusiveness; other times I felt like I was the one following the backward hoofprints. But the lyric essay's wily capaciousness is among its strengths.
>
> I came to define a lyric essay as
>
> a piece of writing with a visible / stand-out / unusual structure that explores / forecasts / gestures to an idea in an unexpected way (xii-xiii)

Here, after all the use of the lyric essay as this thing that you know when you see it, this thing which includes more than other people think it should (if you're D'Agata) or that should be abandoned because it cannot include more than you think it does (if you're Boyer), it's something that has a definition. Noble has given it the respect of a definition, and as such the term can finally be engaged with. When sitting as someone writing the lyric essay, Noble too doesn't try to define it. But for the form to become learnable—for the sake of "[making] it a little more accessible and understandable"—Noble investigates the lyric essay at its taxonomical level. It is the form with the strange structure that unfurls the idea in strange and new ways. When writing the lyric essay, I certainly use my share of strange structures in strange ways. In "Holding," I use the form of the lyric essay to segment the piece into four sections, dividing the idea of the essay like a Punnett square. In "Memento Meminisse," I use braids and numbered passages, evoking both the itemized list of a receipt, and the structure and amorous themes of Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, a book seminal enough to the genre to not be published as a lyric essay, instead listed under "poetry / essay." And in the closing work, "Fragments," I use the fragmented form to show the way in which we interact with artifacts of the past, the way in which pieces of history float with the object into the present, and what that says about us.

By employing the lyric essay in all of these works, I have been allowed to write what I'm trying to write in new ways. Reminiscing about the past and the self are some of the most common themes in literature. How do I add to that tradition while making it my own? In "Making Fresh," part of a spotlight on the "So What" Factor in *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies*, Tim Hillegonds writes about the moment that Speer Morgan, a editor of the *Missouri Review* added to Hillegonds's standard rejection letter that the honesty, detail, phrasing and examination of his piece on addiction and alcoholism was great, but that it "suffers under the

burden of being a much written about subject and one that is extremely hard to make fresh." Hillegonds goes through many ways to approach this issue—the whole spotlight does a great job of looking at the different ways to approach this issue—but specifically on form he writes, "When we give an essay an unexpected form … we change the way it's understood, and we make it fresh." This is another truth of the lyric essay, and perhaps one of the things Boyer cannot latch onto in her blog post. Yes, the lyric essay is comparable to ancient prosimetrum in terms of its hybridity, and it is a notable choice to not include the history of hybrid forms under the umbrella of the lyric essay; I agree with Boyer here. But the lyric essay is different than its history. It's a new form. It is like the forms before it, maybe inspired even, but it is something new. It is a product of its moment.

Hillegonds, in response to Leslie Jamison's statement that she "believed every unoriginal idea could be reborn in the particularity of any given life," writes this: "Moreover, it's not simply that every unoriginal idea *could* be reborn, it's that it *is* reborn—and waiting to be renewed. We cannot say what's never been said, but we can do something else: make timeworn ideas—those great and moving experiences—glisten with the dew of freshness." We, as essayists, not only have the joy of seeing freshness be made through the lyric essay, but we get to observe this freshness embodied as the form itself. It is not what was before it. It is not "in Plato and Augustine and Novalis and Pascal and Genet and Derrida, and definitely in Kierkegaard and Lukacs and Rilke and Moten," as Boyer says. We can find these authors in ourselves, and from ourselves, we can find the lyric essay. But the lyric essay is not in them. They were something new to themselves, and we will be something new to ourselves.

I don't argue about my labels much anymore. I've known I was queer for about half of my life now. Queer is a good label most days. Simple, efficient, inclusive. It's a solid word to

lean on. But I cannot hate on the people who use the new labels of the year. I disagree with the split attraction model that was popular when I was in high school, but there's a joy in seeing people find the label that fits them, even if they weren't the right size a year ago, even if they'll grow out of it in a year. I used the label, and then I chose to stick with the old. Others chose to make their own space. Both are valid. Both are needed. When writing, I will choose the route of the latter. The lyric essay does not kill the history that Montaigne started in his *Essais*. It inhabits a second branch. Let it sprawl, and let it vanish if it must, but let me wrestle first with what it has to offer.

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“Identidem” and Other Lyric Essays

Fragments

I can't tell you much about the bench. I don't remember much about the bench. I only remember fragments. I remember a simple wooden slab held up by two columns of bricks. I remember taking photos on it in our backyard. I remember years later, when it was moved to the front yard. And I remember my mom stacking up the bricks. When the old pillars were starting to slip and crumble, she would lift and move the heavy slab making up the seat, knock over the two legs made of loose bricks, and rebuild them. She'd place the base of the new columns, two squares of eight bricks a piece. Afterwards, the heavy wooden slab would get replaced. There's no way I saw my mom do this more than once or twice, but still, in remembering, that one image has latched itself to me. There's nothing between them, and thus, so often a brick would fall down from the edge of the pillar, then two, then three before a slouch of the whole thing. Such a careful placement of bricks—not just clean new hardware-store bricks, but dirty, dusty, chipped-on-the-corner bricks; two-halves-which-don't-belong-together bricks; edges-lined-in-mortar bricks; bricks where all the pieces were there, but where you knew, you just did, that it was going to fall apart from either an extreme of neglect and weather, or the strain of heavy use, but not something in between.

By now, the bench hasn't been used or moved in years. Both me and my sister have moved away for college, and my mom is a back porch user anyways. The front one is too small to fit a chair, a table, and an ashtray, and too public on that note. Sitting on the front porch is an invitation that has been lost. The Stoics were named so from the Greek *stoa*, a porch, because Zeno would stand (for the English *stand* and the Greek *stoa* come from the same Indo-European root ***sta*-) on the Painted Porch and call fellow learners over to be taught. But my mom has no reason to call anyone over, so now the bench sits in ruin. The center of the slab, where the pith of

the trunk that made it into the plank has now completely decayed. A crack caused by this decay runs from the open end of the slab and makes its way more than halfway down the top of the plank.

The slab comes from the Walnut Street Bridge, if I believe everything my parents have told me. It is a fragment of an old version. I don't believe everything my parents have told me. My father once told me that the tread in tires were there so that you wouldn't crush ants when you drove. This seems like the little lies you tell your kids where they are overly curious, but they aren't little if you weave everything he's said together. I was way too old when I started tearing down that wall of false knowledge. I don't know why he didn't just tell me it was to grip the road. But it's funnier to him this way.

But I believe this hard fact. The slab is too beautiful to come from anywhere else. It is a beautiful shade, naturally dark from the source, but deepened by age, or by chemical additives, probably by pressure treatment. The story I remember is that it was foraged, like so many other things, in the time of my father. Most of his belongings that were inside the house are now long gone, but the remnants of his hand in the front yard were the last to go. One day, he brought in this chunk of pipe. It was probably over a foot in diameter. A muddy rusty red, and then red-orange in the places where the rust itself had seemed to rust. He dug a hole in the front garden. It was no garden but an area in front of the house enclosed by the driveway, sidewalk and porch—where a garden should be, and where a garden now is, ever since my mom remarried to Curtis, someone who shares her pattern of suburban aesthetics. After my father dug the hole, he placed the pipe in vertically. On the top of the pipe, he took the lid of one of our nice thrifted candy dishes and turned it upside-down, creating a wide shallow saucer from it, and then, in his

finishing touches, added a handful of garden pebbles and the centimeter of water it could hold. Now, it was a birdbath. Charming, perhaps, if anyone could have found him and his handiwork charming. Charming, if you didn't live with him. Charming, if you didn't have half his genes. Charming, if you got to drive by it maybe, if you didn't have to stare past it every time you looked out the dining room window, every time you looked at the neighbors' houses from within yours, every time you looked at Richard's proper concrete birdbath, surround by butterfly bushes and other flowers, and therefore surrounded by butterflies and birds and bees. Alive, in one word.

I don't want to use this rotting slab of wood as a metaphor for a house in disrepair, but it would be neglect to act like it wasn't a symptom.

The Walnut Street Bridge is at the heart of Chattanooga's identity. Or that is what the tourism board has latched onto. It is one of the world's longest and oldest pedestrian bridges. It's an iconic part of the skyline. And I will admit that I like having a fragment of history in my childhood yard. Early 2021, while working on a short podcast, I was tasked with writing the introductory fluff that will paint the broad strokes of what that history was.

> It's Chattanooga's own Statue of Liberty, nothing more than a pleasant tourist attraction to most. Many tourist sites will tell you the story of a bridge that was once in a state of disrepair in the 1980s, and was almost demolished before a community effort raised enough funds to revive it into the central attraction it is today. Many have heard about the bridge that holds community events every year, or seen the bridge in the background of wedding photos and postcards.

And yet, this bench is not a fragment of history itself. It is a part of the bridge, which itself is the fragment. The podcast I worked on, *We Care Now*, was commissioned by the Ed Johnson Project, seeking to share with a broad audience the rest of the history. The project itself is named after the man who was lynched on the bridge in 1906, leading to the only criminal trial the Supreme Court has ever judged. Growing up in this city, I will tell you that the Hamilton County curriculum dedicated 30 seconds of one class period in 12th grade to go over this fact.

In an effort to scrub and reconstruct the memory of my childhood, I have spent time staring at the past using Google Maps. Through grainy captures I see the slight movement of the bricks and the slab every five or so years as it alternates its location in front of the porch, after it was moved to the front yard, after the tornado in April of 2011 knocked down the largest oak in our backyard, taking with it a few yards of dirt in the roots and physically destroying the resting place of the bench. I see other things in these captures. The birdbath; a mailbox nailed to a large decorative post he also made, in the shape of a cross, with a thrift-store lantern glued on top; The verdant shrubs he cut down marking the property line; the broke down cars from a time before my memory, neglected passion projects, which filled the property before they were sold to feed the kids. What is the point of this capture, being held in large servers, with millions of pictures of other houses, of other childhoods? Do I feel more connected to the moments of myself when I see things I once saw with my eyes? Why do I attempt to pick up the fragments of past still available to me and glue them to my present?

The act of observation here raises the questions itself. Knowing that I'm writing a piece trying to preserve the memory, the idea of this bench, causes me to ask about it at Thanksgiving.

While sitting, for once, on the front porch as everyone takes a smoke break, I raise the question as casually as possible. I am sitting on the bench now, and I point at it. *Where did the slab come from again?* I am worried that I was wrong. If it didn't come from the bridge, my piece is ruined. I am ashamed to be writing about something so insignificant as the bench. At the same time, I am ashamed to be writing about something so important. When Maggie Nelson writes her *Bluets*, she knows that she's not really talking about the color blue. I can tell myself I am attempting such innocence as capturing this bench on the page, but we are never just talking about what we're saying. Our brains merely cast shadows on our tongue.

I push further then I usually do when I, for the first time, ask *how* we got the slab, not where. When my parents first moved in together, they lived on the other side of town, in Northshore, right next to the bridge, in the late 80s. My mom tells me that their neighbor Scott had the slab. He told them he just took it from a pile on the construction site years earlier. The restoration of the bridge had stalled, and surely, when it kicked back up in a few months, all that beautiful wood was going to the dump. Besides, Scott needed something heavy to tie his dog to when he put him in the yard. Eventually it traded hands, and then it was my father's.

My mom tells me that walking the bridge was my father's idea of a first date. I didn't realize why she didn't think so too, until she reminded me that when he first asked her out, the date would have involved breaking into a construction site and making sure you didn't step through the missing planks.

I still come to my work as an amateur archivist with a numb desperation. The work I attempt to do in my writing, the work committees do in creating memorials, the work servers do in preserving: what is the reason for it? Historically, people have only ever wanted pieces. The

Colosseum is not in disrepair just because time did that. We didn't want to keep it in repair. After an earthquake shattered it, we plundered the bricks. We cared less about the whole picture, but about one part. One of my professors tells the story of how his son-in-law's restaurant in Rome has an old Colosseum brick framed above the door to the bathroom. He owns a fragment of the past. *Only* a fragment? Or is a fragment something great and powerful itself?

The porch-standing Stoics had an answer. Marcus Aurelius, the last of Rome's "Five Good Emperors," wrote in Book V of his *Mediations* that "the integrity of the whole is mutilated, if thou cuttest off anything whatever from the conjunction and the continuity either of the parts or of the causes." Fragments don't exist, and to act like they do is a mutilation of the world as we know it. Rarely is the act of nature as passive as we claim it is. Humans are in the whole of nature too. The National Parks often look as sublime as they do because of centuries of an indigenous population tending to the brush and wildlife, hands on. It is the white conservationist's view that true nature is something untouched, removed from humans, that is causing parks to fall into disrepair. What we have done to the world, and what we haven't done to the world, is part of the history.

The British Museum collects fragments of the world too and puts them in one place. There is something to be said of the looting it has done in its lifespan, but we must also ask what we think about attempting to reduce the world into one building, shattering it to condense it. What story does it tell? When I see the Lonely Sister in the British Museum, I can see what the fragment speaks of: a skilled craftsmanship removed from any context worth talking about. And I can quickly walk room to room and say the same about a myriad of pieces. What is important here is when you look at the white space around each object. I only care about the Lonely Sister because I have seen pictures of the five Caryatids in Athens, with one empty spot for their sixth.

I do not care about that brick above the bathroom in a restaurant in Rome. I care about the whole—or the unwhole—of the Colosseum.

The bench is a fragment. It is a mutilation of something I keep reaching for. But in reaching for it, I am attempting to reconnect it. A meditation on the bench is an unmutilation. I see the bench, and I see my mom cleaning up what my father has handed her, restacking the pillars so it won't fall completely. I see the remnants of my father rotting through the center, and years later, my mom and Curtis continuing to rejuvenate the house in his decade-long absence.

When asking about the slab at Thanksgiving, Curtis tells my mom and I his dream plans for it. He would take it to a woodshop, run it through a planer, and pressure wash all the moss and rot out the center. After that, he would fill all the voids with resin, and make it into the countertop for a little bar table that could go in the kitchen. I take quick mental offense at the idea of destroying the bench, but it would be the last restoration it needed. Before I can say anything, my mind is changed. Let the bench fall now. The artifacts have ran their course in our yard. There is no need for a fragment if I have no need for the remembering of the whole. I wouldn't mind eventually being handed down a nice handmade table.

On the Use of Slurs

> 1a. The act of putting something to work, or employing or applying a thing, for any (esp. a beneficial or productive) purpose; the fact, state, or condition of being put to work, employed, or applied in this way; utilization or appropriation, esp. in order to achieve an end or pursue one's purpose. Frequently with *of*.

I am standing outside, talking with a real adult, not just one of those dumb kids my age who say just because they go to college that they're an adult, when, in one fell swoop, I turn to see a kid my age stop, point at me, and shout "Queer!" This person is one of my friends, but it takes milliseconds of a reaction speed to be disarmed by their leather jacket, pins, boots. They are one of us, and in this game of identification, I have been labeled one of them. I quickly look to the adult, Gerda, one of the openly queer employees of the university, quickly look back at the kid, raise my arm, and with a hesitant wrist, call them Queer back. It is after laughter that Gerda gets offended. Not offended that we are slinging such language, but offended because we have yet to offer such a slur in her direction.

Queer slurs, in my experience, have not been used often in my direction as insults; I do well to shelter myself from those who would openly be so aggressive. Instead, they have become markers, badges, signaling to those around me what we are.

A few years back, I made a conscious effort to start saying more of these words. I surrounded myself with my gay friends, and I felt a disconnect from them at some point. Growing up, I was in the perfect era to gain a puritan mindset from my early days on the internet. Think of Tumblr, an echo chamber of young teens arguing their positions out to their natural conclusions, without any real world experience, holding on to ideas that certain things, no matter the context, were always right, and, of course, certain things were always wrong. I quickly realized as I spent more time around other queer people that it's actually okay for slurs to be used

in identification. Reclamation is important. But looking in a mirror, I worried that others wouldn't like if I called myself those words. I didn't think I looked gay enough. Which, in a world where only one person knows you from within your skin and everyone else knows you from outside it, I was telling myself that I, myself, was not gay enough.

Years pass, and I slowly become okay with using the labels needed. I got more adamant that I wasn't just someone who liked when people addressed them with the singular they, but I was someone who went by the pronoun exclusively. And a year later, now in college, I was finally calling myself trans, not just not-cis, after I had the encouragement from new trans friends that I was a real trans person, whatever real means. Each new layer of identification outwards becomes a new layer of acceptance inward. But I still wouldn't call myself any of those strong words. I didn't think I was able to reclaim any of those words. This final layer I wouldn't use for identification was the last layer that nagged at me. It was the last layer that I wouldn't accept.

But to be a fag who calls their friends fags is to be one comfortable in their skin. There is a layer of comfort I've found in calling myself a dyke or in my friends calling me a tranny. There's a superficial layer of discourse involved when talking about identity and the ethics of certain labels over others, but in the pit of real life, I experience comfort for the first time in myself.

> Use: 1d. Employment of a language, words, etc., for the purpose of communication.

I spent a long time not using queer slurs. Ultimately, I felt that I had no right to them (read: no right to *reclaim* them.) But I think I can. To say it less doubtfully, I know I can. Saying I know I can—it is the final level of acceptance. I am gay enough, trans enough, queer enough to identify myself in the ingroup. To say I can't call myself a tranny fag dyke is to say I'm not a

tranny fag dyke. It is to deny me of my identity. The use of slurs manifests itself as an act of acceptance and defiance: pride. I am a real queer.

Queer is a word that moves us away from the extremes of the argument. You might get uncomfortable with how flippant I am about the use of fag and such. I am too sometimes. But here, the argument gets academic. Queer is a word, which was commonly used as a slur, but has been taken and molded into a self-identifier, and then back into an other-identifier. Queer is what you called others to hurt them. Queer is what you call yourself. Queer is what you call others to label them, to box them in abstractly and politely. It is one of the letters in the acronym now. There is so much discourse with LGBT vs LGBT+ or LGBTQ or LGBTQIA. Once I had a professor use LGBTQIAKOP; she is the only published source to use that acronym. Some harmful types call us "alphabet people," not realizing some of us will think it's funny and call ourselves alphabet people. But optics is an important question when labeling. *Will people take us seriously?* I think LGBTQIA is silly, a mouthful, so I don't use it. But every few months I see the LGB Alliance come back into the news. I remove the QIA because it is implied, and because I know they belong, but that organization so purposefully removes the T in a stand against me and my friends. They know they can get away with it, because many will just think it's another shortening. So now, in an avoidance of an acronym, the academic term is simply queer. And we can use queer in a classroom setting. I am a queer and I will use it in a classroom setting. But even that is not without its arguments. I like the word, but it has been the common term since I realized what I was. I was not around early enough to have the word pinned on me like a target.

If I'm honest, I've never been called any slurs with an intent to harm. I have reclaimed them, because I looked inside and found out that I wasn't using it because I didn't feel as gay or as trans as the others who did. But this act of affirmation is messy. Words should be chosen

carefully. I am not careful with my words. I will continue to weaken the meaning around friends, because I think I am allowed to. But where does the balance come in? Should I not use it loosely? And in response, does that mean I can only use it with purpose?

At parties, when I first start adding fag into my vocabulary, I feel like a kid again. I still remember being in 9th grade, sitting with all the queers and not-quite-yet-queers, telling a joke I can't remember that I read online and saying bitch because it was important for the punchline. And everyone looked at me and laughed. "[Jude] said bitch!" It slipped out hesitantly. Made it through the tongue with effort but got caught on the lips and teeth. "[Jude], is that the first time you've cursed?" I had recently started to feel like a person, and for the first time in my life, I was evaluating the beliefs handed down to me from my mother and my mostly absent father. And I decided it was okay to break the seal. It was okay to curse, and my friends were happy that one of the last ones of the group had finally fallen to the joys of fuck and shit. But for a few weeks, I only said it if the conversation required it. Like if I was quoting or reading something. I only said it if it was important, if I meant it.

Being a real adult, fag slipped out the same. But only in a special circumstance, as a treat for the listener. To laugh again at the joy of Jude finally saying it. At parties, I tell drunks "Yeah, I'm trying to incorporate the f slur into my vocabulary."

"Excuse me?"

"Yeah, the f slur."

"Faggot?"

"Yeah, that one."

If talking abstractly about it, I wouldn't use it. It made me uncomfortable. There was no reason to say it. Only if I was calling a friend it. When called on this behavior, I would tell others, "I only say it if I mean it."

The party, full of people able to reclaim the words, sounds like a frat house if you don't know. By 3 a.m., it devolves into gays slumped around Nick, the white cishet host, telling him "Come on, Nick, you can say it. Just this once, call me a fag." "Nick, call me a tranny!" It's fun to mess with him. It's fun to test him. One time, he sent a Snapchat of his face with the caption "slurs," to the whole party, and immediately passed out. In the morning, by nature of the app, he could not see what innocence he sent, but could only see the numerous responses saying "Nick, you need to slow down on the alcohol next time. That was not cool, buddy." He thinks for a few minutes that he's actually gone and done it, until he's told that he's fine. He's of lower status because he can't say anything we can't. It's punching up, ultimately, but the joke is that it's fun to say slurs. I don't know whether he wins the game or loses if he ever caves from all the goading. No one does.

Luke, also a frequenter, shocks me a year earlier, when I drive by a Moe's and complain about the logo redesign. "It's gay," he says.

"What?"

"You know, like, it's gay?"

"Derogatory or honorary?"

Even the word gay gets reclaimed by us. Usually to say something's good, but Luke's other friends have decided for the grand sake of irony (already misguided), that we should reclaim it to call something lame. He's gayer than me, but still years later, me and Terrance talk about it at the dinner table. Last week, Terrance asks me if we're teetering the same line when we

call each other fags for talking about crushes. It's shorthand for "congrats on being yourself and talking about who you love despite the horrors outside. I'm glad you're gay and in love," but we still laugh when we say it.

Well, and what of it? A voluntary delusion, you might say.

—Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*

Memento Meminisse

1. Suppose I were to say that I had fallen in love with receipts. It was a little love at first—insidious—but so are most loves. In a digital age, our physical records diminish, and O, how lovely it is to have a physical memento still—coming from the Latin *memento*, meaning "remember!" I will remember indeed. I have a little collection of them by now, but if I was being honest, I would have called it a hoard. Most recently, I was clearing out the back of my car, a space that is often telling me *ne memento* or "don't remember!", wishing that I had just tossed the damn things when I got them, because who cares that I got gas six months ago or that I bought a candy bar at work last week. And then, I saw the receipt that incapacitated me. December 18th, 2021. I paid for parking at the aquarium, which was a fine place to celebrate an anniversary the day of our one month.

2. Those sheets of thermal paper, scorched by such precise and pixelated irons, in ways that deceive many into believing it's traditional ink. I love receipts: overlooked scraps shoved through weird printers, oh-no-thank-yous thrown into the trash, or if you're lucky, dispersed into bits and bytes after NO RECEIPT is tapped, because who needs a paper receipt now that we have digital records of what we've bought, where we've been, what thoughts we've thought. No, something so quotidian is screaming "Look! Look! Look at the date! You paid for parking on an overcast day in December! *Memento!* Remember who you were with? Do you wish you didn't?" Receipts are nothing wanted to us in our daily life now.

3. Going to the most obvious tourist attraction in town for the one month makes you wonder where you'll go for a one-year, or a six-month, or a three-month. Of course, we didn't make it to our three-month. So when the three-month would have been, I was left with the physical remnants and mental anguish. That week, I sat at an anti-valentine's poetry jam, because just like I—one week from the wound of heartbreak, that which toughens us the most—most poets have just as much hate to burn on the page as love. There I heard a poem that would light me on fire; Catullus 85—*odi et amo*, "I hate and I love"—and I was sent back into the page with a frenzy.

4. Receipts are nothing, but in the sense that a splinter is nothing. It's a remnant of a problem decayed to the point that the annoyance is amplified. Receipts were crucial in ancient times. You needed that record of sale. But as we move into the digital age, the physical becomes waste. Why do your taxes with a shoebox when you can do it with a flash drive? The receipt becomes another feed of information. We all know the CVS receipt: 10 percent bill of sales, 90 percent advertising. The receipt is there not to record sales which our banking apps now do, but to compete for the attention everything else wants.

5. Catullus is known for a couple of his poems, but do not talk to me if you know him for his vulgar ones. I do not care much for Catullus 16: *pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo*, translation not included here. I care about his love poetry, and his grief poetry. He was a wretch who fell in love with a married woman, and when she showed affection for others, he could not decide which emotion he wanted to immortalize in his work. Out of his 116 extant poems, 25 of them are about Lesbia, a pseudonym he gave for a woman named Clodia. He named her Lesbia in his work, comparing her to Sappho of Lesbos, calling out not her beauty, but her wit. He writes of "a

girl wiser than Sappho's muse," of how they loved, of how he had doubts, of how they separated, and of how grief racked him. Cicero named her Quadrantaria—Quarter—after the price of entrance to a bathhouse. Caelius, an orator and the Rufus in Catullus's poems that Lesbia abandons Catullus for, calls her Nola—the Unwilling—sarcastically.

6. Catullus's poems say to me "Look, I was here! Look, I loved! Look, I grieved!" They almost didn't make it into the present. From what we know, Catullus died suddenly. He did not have time to get his affairs in order, and he certainly did not have time to round up all his poems, floating around on scrolls he copied and sold to the wealthy. And no one was there to round them up after his death. In Catullus I, when he describes his "charming little book," he had no idea there could be one scroll that would hold all that remains of his life's work. I imagine when I die, no one will be there to round up the receipts of my life and my love either. So I see a lot of my life now as prep work. I stake my claim with my receipts. If only I felt I had time to write a more complete receipt of my life.

7. His poems are a marvel, but it's an argument of signifer versus signified. I love the story not just for the language and craft, but because I can see so much of the life and man behind them. I mourn his poems which didn't make it into the present, but it is the blank space they leave that speaks for itself. It is a story of time, and of the sudden loss of it, and of the span of centuries after it.

8. Catullus made it into the present by one single measure: Codex Veronensis, or Codex V. Codex V is now lost, but the other codices that remain come from it. We have no classical works

of Greek or Latin written by the hand of the author. The closest we have is parts of the New Testament copied a few hundred years later. Most of the work that has made it to the present has been copied over and over and over by Christian monks. As you can imagine, Catullus was not of significant value to the church. If Catullus 16 wasn't even published in full in English until a hundred years ago, imagine what the early Christians thought of him when they found his carnal poems about his friends, or his sappy poems about unrequited lovers. I don't think they'd like my poetry either.

9. Why do I hold on to receipts? Well, why keep mementos? My receipts retrace my steps, they retrace the steps of those around me, but why record those steps? In an age of digital waste, there is no reason to try and remember it all. Trying to document everything and come back to it only fogs the windows of time we are trying to see though. I take so many photos on my phone that I struggle to look back through them. Over 500 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute. Mementos scratch futilely at the past asking that we be remembered. Why do I let an obsession pile up on my desk, when it slowly gets pushed to the back of the desk and falls to the floor with its kind, like those coin pusher machines in arcades? There is no prize to be won from an excess of receipts. I couldn't tell you the answers. I like reminders. I like reminders to remember.

10. In the aftermath of my little love, I thought that I was diligent in collecting the mementos and shoving them into a box. My box held a sweater to sleep in and a shirt of theirs they liked to paint in, equivalent to the three shirts they had—and have—of mine, along with some clippings from bouquets of flowers and other gifts I have shoved out of memory. And then, curiously, there

is a folder of receipts. When collecting them, I was still living the moment present tense: there was nothing to remember yet, only things to live. And now that I was at the stage of remembering, I thought that I should box them up? There were lunch receipts, gift receipts, and receipts for the precise amount of gas it took to drive from Chattanooga to Sevierville and back. Reminders scrubbed from everywhere of everything. Everywhere except the back of a car.

11. Codex V survived not by the hand of the church, but of a single scribe who recognized the love and grief of Catullus. Later, in the 1300s, scholars would find a single basket of scrolls. And at the bottom of the basket, they found one scroll titled the *Carmina Catulli*—the Songs of Catullus—and so, Catullus was preserved.

12. Why does it matter that I have a record of a date I went on a year ago with someone who I wouldn't stay dating, someone who would start as a Latin classmate, someone who would morph into a partner when our passion of the language morphed into a different passion, someone who would become a stranger I presented research with that was co-submitted months ago, someone who would coast back into my life as a friend when we no longer grieved a partner but someone to speak the language to. It matters as much as any other memory: it doesn't, until the remembered isn't there anymore. It's ephemera. That which fleets is that which we try, desperately, to nail down. Within the wastes of paper thrown in a box, onto a desk, or into the back of a car, there's something truer than any built narrative.

13. When I find the receipt in the back of my car among every other little piece of junk, I stand still and stare. I am not transported to the breakup, or to the conversation we had earlier that day,

but to a pleasant moment—a lost moment but lovely all the same. When the scholars found Codex V, they did not yet know the multitude of moments of Catullus's life they had recovered. In one scroll, attacks on Julius Caesar, a eulogy for a dead brother, sarcastic insights into Roman homosexuality, and 25 poems of love, hate, and grief for Lesbia. If only I had 25 receipts.

14. So the receipts are useless, except to invoke an ambush of the memory. But every monk thought the paper that recorded Catullus was useless. Every monk except one. I will not stand here and claim that my faded parking receipt holds a candle to what Codex V did for the preservation of poetry. But let me argue this. Is the act of remembering something insignificant not what makes it significant? The receipts say nothing of themselves, but that one ambush I get before I toss it months later is worth it to me. The receipts often have nothing to say, but they speak to us nonetheless. I remember, I remember, I remember.

Da mihi castitatem et continentiam, sed noli modo.

—St. Augustine, *Confessions*

Holding, Then the Letting Go

I imagine my father sanding the shelves of the heavy solid bookshelf, which is sitting to my left as I write this. I can almost see him staining the veneer. Next, he staples in a new backing board, while I sit in a crib somewhere else. This is as far into the present as I want to see. Let the real bookshelf, the current bookshelf, overflow. This is the furniture I want, and it's the furniture I hold on to.

We carried the bulky TV armoire to the street the day I was no longer a kid, but some nebulous thing called a teenager. From it, we removed the board games from the lower cabinet, the Candyland, Chutes and Ladders, and a peeling cardboard checkers board. Next, the CRT TV, the one with an ID plaque on the back, stating "Hamilton Co. Schools," followed by unintelligible numbers and letters. The armoire took with it the child-scribed Sharpie, the space for missing knobs and latches and hinges, and its right door, loose and balanced next to the empty spot for the TV. We got the TV from my first grade classroom, either after they repaired and tossed various items caught in the flood or after the school shut down a few years later, its clientele merged with the rebuilt East Ridge Elementary down the road, and my first years of memory left to rot in an abandoned school behind the public playground. They do SWAT training in the building now. Every year a new window cracks. I wish we held onto that junk, that piece of childhood.

I throw lines of square tubing off a drop into the city dump, a month or so after buying what was a cheap platform frame with a headboard in a thrift store, a month or so after I was reminded not to skimp on anything that keeps you from the ground. The guy in hi-vis let me throw it over the edge despite my license reflecting that I don't live in the city, I live two blocks from the city, even if I've been here for years. That night, I return to spending my nights on an inherited mattress placed directly on the floor. I sleep hard, but happy that the unstable frame is gone.

In a constant state of moving from dorm-room-chic into something that makes it look like I have disposable income (not yet), I move everything I want to hold on to but don't know what to do with to the corner: boxes of receipts and papers, a dried bundle of lavender, metal water bottles, and a tour poster I told myself I wouldn't buy, which was true until Trudy, manning the merch table, told me that the band just came around to sign some stuff. Peter's signature is hidden in the black shadow of the design. Trudy tells me that Peter likes when it looks like his signature is missing. All of these items sit on or around a sturdy metal table, made of four metal pipes welded to a beveled sheet. I imagine trying to give the table back to my family, replacing the corner with a reading nook, something that fits myself. All this, when I remember why I'm still holding on to it.

I don't have to imagine this one. This one I know. My grandfather—my mom's father, dead 20 years before I was born—starts a project in his shop at work. He cuts the sheet metal. He bends the sheet metal. He welds the sheet metal to four legs, paints it all, and takes it home.

Identidem

In conversation with Maggie Nelson's Argonauts

Theseus and his crew dock the ship in Athens, having returned successfully from Crete. Thanking Apollo for Theseus's safe return, the Athenians make a promise to keep this ship afloat. Every year they will pilot the ship to Delos to make sacrifices, and every year they will return. The first time it returns with Theseus, the shipwrights find the deck cracked in some places. This will not do. The next year, after the first ceremony at Delos, split libations stain other planks. The condition of the ship is not just a matter of the king. This is about a god. This is about the link of the real life Athenians, all the way up to the fourth century B. C. according to Plutarch, to their legendary founder. So, for half a millennium, the shipwrights of Athens replace the timbers. Enough time passes that some Athenians don't even know if Theseus was ever actually alive.

Imagine the ghost of Theseus, centuries later, reminiscing about his ship. He's telling one new ghost about his old escapades, and he decides to look down from the heavens at what lasting mark he has left. When he tells his new friend about his old ship, where does he point? To the docks, or to the scrapyards?

*

In ninth grade, I sit in the back of the class with two others, yet unnamed. We conspire reasons that others are untrustworthy, and reason why being thirteen is the hardest job in the world. I learn to write small as if people are watching. Certainly they are. Late in the semester, one of them asks me what my codename is—what is the name they can call me that no one else can. I don't have one. They write theirs down on pieces of paper. Something neutral, or something masculine if masculinity is foreign. There is a large blank for me.

*

All the bloodstains have been turned into decorations on scrap. The physical remnants of Theseus—sweat, fingerprints, dust from the fibers of his tunic—have landed in their final resting place. He points, very clearly, to the thing of beauty docked in the harbor. “Look at that. That’s my ship.” He uses those words. He never gave it a name. Who needs a name, an identifier, for their love when it’s so desperately clear what it is?

*

Maggie Nelson, fearing the insufficiency of words, comes back to a version of the argument of the Ship of Theseus early in her great genre-bending memoir *The Argonauts*, using the name of the ship of Jason: “Just as the *Argo*’s parts may be replaced over time but the boat is still called the *Argo*, whenever the lover utters the phrase ‘I love you,’ its meaning must be renewed by each use, as ‘the very task of love and of language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new.’” Here she directly quotes *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, indeed by Roland Barthes. She asks of us, will our words ever be enough? Will what we tell people ever be enough? I ask us, will our names ever be enough? The Ship of Theseus is the identity of many under one name. But the Argo is a another name for the Ship of Theseus; it’s another name for the thing that has one name. Sometimes language fails. Language is all we have, and it fails. Barthes is right when he says that love requires us to revisit the same thing with renewed interest. But we know how it feels when the love is lacking.

*

In tenth grade, I move to a school where they only allow five people to transfer in each year after the first. Groups are established already and something stirs in me, some comfort in the discomfort, known in the unknown. I decide to jump in and change myself. I am Jude now. I

fashion some new labels. One of the first people I know, a kid from Signal Mountain, the rich part of town, tells me that's stupid. The next person I tell offers to fight him for me. I am learning quickly to only tell those I trust.

*

When someone mentions me by name, they are drawing a line, stringing up all the experiences of me and my past under one word. Changing my name was the greatest comfort growing up. It was this idea that I could shed my past if I tried hard enough. I could choose to not be the kid with a childhood too hard to remember, or the kid who was just plain socially inept in middle school, or the kid who was simply put, a boy. But the ultimate pain of Theseus is that it *is* the same ship. The boards thrown into the scrapyard or dragged from the lumberyard *are* the ship all the same. What makes it the ship is that people call it the ship. The new nails, sails, boards, and paste experience this journey in the harbor everyday. This does not erase the past of the old boards, however. I am not me, he was not me, they will not be me. No, I am nothing that can overcome time. I am bound by that fourth dimension, and anything that I related with is just the world catching glimpses coming in and out of view, light casting shadows on the wall. We are more than our past. But the past is still me.

*

When I was working retail still, many of the suburbanites would lean in, read my nametag, and tell me they like my name. I like my name too. I would tell them thanks, I picked it myself. It is pretty, most say, and I like being pretty. It is relatively uncommon too, unlike Noah, which was the most common name of my birth year in 2002. Noah does not roll off of the tongue. Noah is a name muddled. It is a name that you turn your head at, only to realize someone is saying the

clearest expression of denial, “No.” It is a name that you can convince yourself you’re shedding for many reasons, none of which related to identity. All practical reasons.

Those other Noahs are bullies.

No, yeah, I just wanted something more original.

I hated how much I had to turn my head just for someone to be saying something else to someone else.

If that was true, go back and punch my 10th grade self for me. Because Jude is no better. Someone saying dude fits in the same spot of the sentence. You is the most common pronoun in the English language. Under the fans of the metal-ceiled stockroom, it is impossible to tell if something is requesting Jude on walkie, or asking someone to move the conversation to channel two. But I continue to find comfort in it. Why?

For years, when people ask the question “why did you change your name?”—somewhere between an ice breaker and the most personal question in the world—I tell people I just wanted to move away from my old name, and Jude was the closest one in reach. I changed it soon after my mom tells us in the car after school that I was almost a Jude, and that my sister Chloe was almost a Nora. For years, I tell the lie enough that I manage to convince myself that I’m not Jude because I like the flexibility, because I enjoy imagining being called Jude, Judy, Judah, Judith, Judas. It’s neutral, but doesn’t shout like Alex or something with a Y in it. One time a younger kid, still in the liminal space I once inhabited, was ringing up my groceries, and I leaned in and read their nametag. They had managed to fit the Y into Alex, but I can’t remember where. I say nothing, and thought about them for the rest of the day.

*

After going by the name for years, I would only introduce myself as Jude to strangers. Call me whatever you want if you already know me. In high school, my school district required one P.E. credit to graduate, but my high school was too small to house a gym, so I had to take a dual-enrollment class. Sitting in a lecture hall the first day, before we started meeting in the gym, I correct the professor reading the roll on the first day, telling them that my name was actually Jude. The words fall out of my mouth and the interaction went on for a few seconds too long. After class, one of my classmates admonishes me for slowing down the class. He tells me it wasn't the right time.

*

I only find this romanticism of identity with first names. I don't imagine changing my last name. Changing a last name feels like trying to change fate. Yet, my last name doesn't even mean much. I'm a long way past from the Gaelic O'Keeffes. Centuries after they dropped the O to fit in, and after the agents at the ports chose to spell it with a brutal efficiency that other Keefes or Keeffes weren't suffered with. In this sense, I can't identify with these distant ancestors. But, and I forget this fact often, I'm not even a Keef by blood. Keef is the last name of my father's stepfather. If we're being direct, I could be a Hall.

When I was in middle school, my (biological) grandfather, Ben Hall, just Ben to us kids, sought my side of the family. He left when my father was two, or was kicked out—these family narratives get ambiguous depending on who you ask—and had came back to reconcile two ways. He would learn more about the present generation of the family, and I could learn more about the past. Later, in between high school and college, I spent the summer with him across the country, which was the most time I had ever spent with any family. He told me all about the ancestry work he had done, and how he had traced himself back as a descendent of Cuthbert Grant, a

leader within the Métis people in the areas between Canada and the early United States. He had his RV wrapped with a Red River cart, a symbol that represented his heritage.

In the physical sense, this is the furthest back I could trace myself. But I can't claim it. I can't call it me. I have no lived experience as a Grant. I barely can consider myself a Hall. The closest I've gotten is when I walked out of the shower in a towel, running to the guest room, when Ben stopped me to say "There's another Grant trait: you've got no ass!" Speak of identity in physicality.

*

Still in high school, my English teacher gets upset when she finds out I've been letting her call me the wrong name for a few months. She approaches me in the hall between classes to tell me. Earlier that year, I told a different teacher, further socially left than her, which sends her into a short, mostly joking rant on everyone making it hard for her by wanting to go by nicknames. I do not laugh.

*

O'Keeffe in its original language means gentle, which, when combined with my first name Jude, comes out to mean gentle praise. I do not know my name for its meaning. I am Jude because Jude sounds pretty. I do not know my name as meaning gentle praise, firstly, because the white folks generally do not pick name for meaning. Usually it is because it sounds pretty, or maybe because an important uncle was named so. My mother chose my middle name because it was in the family. It is her maiden name, Wells. At five letters, it is the largest part of my name. It is the part of my name that goes back the furthest on my mom's side. Wells comes from Welsh origin—both coming from the same root ultimately—meaning someone in my past lived near a well, similar to names like Church or Hill, or an ancestor worked with wells, similar to the

Smiths and the Baxters, coming from the obsolete feminine form of baker, bakster, just like the words dexter (dyer) or brewster (obvious).

But not like the word seamster, which is the masculine against seamstress.

I do not know my name as meaning gentle praise, secondly, because even if my mother did care about a names meaning, it wouldn't matter because she didn't name me Jude.

*

My first class of college, I am asked to research the meaning of my first and my last name. It's a means of helping the professor have something besides our name and our face to attach to ourselves before he knows us by our other idiosyncrasies—my ability to sit at the other end of the seminar table and not back down from eye contact, Jacob's ability to sit at his left side and laugh at his jokes, Luke's ability to sit in the corner and tie our book to its historical context. It was shorthand before the longhand was learned. Before he tells us this assignment, he calls roll. I tell him I go by Jude, in a few words with confidence. I am sitting close enough to see him cross a simple line through me on the roll before writing Jude above the old.

*

No one argues about whether Rome is the same Rome as it was in its past. Of course it is, it is Rome. But then again. Yet in our minds, Istanbul, Byzantinum, New Rome, and Constantinople can feel as different as any other combination of cities. But they are all the same, segmented over time in neat chunks, as is the nature of language, the ultimate divider. Constinople is as much Istanbul as Ancient Rome is current Rome. Two different things which are the same. They are physically different. We are physically different from our past. It's common knowledge now that we replace the cells of our body every 7 years. Which is a minor fib, but the sentiment is true. Our brain replaces a little more than a percent a year. Our skeleton is different every ten years.

Our skin and liver replaces itself in a couple years. We are our own little biological ships. But there is still the memories attached to the self, psychologically or socially, but even physically. The scar on my right index finger tells me the time I opened my front door as a teen and the metal handle broke right of, taking a bit of me with. The left index finger remembers the time a classmate took a pen with a jagged metal clip out of my hand too quickly. My sister has a grey dot on her eyelid from when we were young and I dropped a pencil while she lay on the floor. I gave her the scar, not some past version of me. No matter how hard you try and distance yourself.

The idea of identity—a name, a place, a feeling—is enough to let us know the truth, that no matter what, we can't sit and act like it's stupid to compare rotten planks to the floating vessel. No matter how water-logged, no matter how bug-infested, no matter how forgotten, the past is real. Paraphrasing Faulkner, I agree that the past isn't even the past. When people fear the deadname, either their own or another's, they are fearing the past and its hold over the present. My past, no matter how water-logged, no matter how bug-infested, no matter how forgotten, is mine.

*

Now, the classroom technology asks me for my name before the professor gets it. My legal name is accessible still I'm sure, but there are no questions. I tell it who I am, and it passes it along smoothly, without pause. I don't know how many of my current professors have any false information about me to correct. More and more, am I Jude from the start.

*

There is an allure to visiting the same Rome that Caesar was killed in, that Vergil wrote in, and that Nero burned down. But factually, it's not the same Rome. It's been, well, burnt down,

or sacked, or simply eroded. The city of Troy that the legendary Danaans fought against still exists. And we can still see the mighty walls mentioned in the *Iliad*, but they are not the same. Troy is not even the same. The city, currently named Hisarlik by the Turks and Troy by the tourists, in built upon layers and layers of Troys. When Heinrich Schliemann first dug into Hisarlik's soil and found what he named the Treasure of Priam, he dug a thousand years too far into the earth. Modern scholars put his findings in line with Troy II, from around 2500 B.C.. The Troy of the Iliad is currently dated around 1200 B.C., as Troy VIIa.

But still, it is exciting to see those walls. A professor tells the class one day of the mostly unexciting trip he took with students to Troy one year, where nothing of note happened, except for an odd moment where he and the students took turns chasing each other around the walls, one pretending to be swift-footed Achilles, one pretending to be horse-taming Hector. He spent the rest of the moment telling us all the other places he'd rather send students in the area than Troy.

Even with nothing there, even with a few short decaying walls, there was a moment of joy in the recognition of stringing together the past with the present, all in the name of Troy and her well-built walls. The mythological process of naming is antithetical to the reality of dirt and buried bricks and uncovered gold, but there is beauty in the lies it tells.

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