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Nonduality and Identity: An Exploration of Form, Genre, and Perspective

Hannah Ritter

Departmental Honors Thesis  
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga  
English: Creative Writing

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## Creative Writing Departmental Thesis Craft Essay

In defining the differentia that separate poetry and prose, many attempts have been made to mark the distinction with the fact that poetry is more rhythmic than prose, often written in meter and organized by clear line breaks. However, in modern and contemporary writing, rhythm and meter have been subverted and manipulated in both prose and poetry, undermining the basis of such differentia. At their core, these characteristics are of form rather than genre—in her essay “Strategic Formalism,” Caroline Levine defines form as “*containing, plural, overlapping, portable, and situated,*” meaning that any form may be applied to and manipulated within various contexts. Each form allows certain affordances and constraints, which often intersect or overlap; this adds a level of multiplicity to a given text as it can be filtered through many contexts simultaneously. This is not to say that a consideration of overlapping or external forms is necessary to understand such a text, but rather that these frameworks are coexisting and intertwined in such a way that guides both authorial presentation of content and audience interpretation of content. In other words, social forms and systems of knowledge influence what the individual thinks or does within those forms.

Fred Newton Scott attempts to differentiate poetry and prose in his essay, “The Most Fundamental Differentia of Poetry and Prose,” claiming that the fundamental difference between poetry and prose is that “poetry is communication in language for expression’s sake [whereas] prose is expression...for communication’s sake” (Scott 269). However, as Levine argues, authorial intent is also influenced by the contexts in which the art is created (cultural, historical, etc.), which in turn call for either expression or communication. In our current day, the affordances and constraints of various forms can call for expression or communication at the same time, even within the same page—as such, the risk of forms clashing, interrupting, and

derailing one another is far higher. An intentional awareness, selection, and application of various forms and the contexts in which those forms are used are extremely important to the writing process, particularly when writing in or about social contexts.

To return to the writing process itself, it is true that self-expression is connected to individual identity and experience. However, as theorists such as Judith Butler have argued, one's identity is only real or concrete insofar as it is a direct result of one's existence within the social context of a structured society. Further, as is seen in Buddhist philosophy, it can be argued that there is no true Self, but rather that each individual is only one part of a collective whole. From here, we can argue that there is no true definition of form to begin with—ordering principles are only effective insofar as we collectively agree to follow them, in turn reinforcing said principle despite its nonreality. If there is no true 'reality,' then there can be no true Self, either.

That being said, if communicative writing "arises...from the urgent necessities of a practical situation" (Scott 262), we can assume that a need for self-expression arises alongside a need for communication, or that there is no true divide between the two. Self-expression is necessary to communication, and communication is necessary to self-expression, but if there is no Self to begin with—if there is no divide between Self and Other—then any individual experience is in actuality universal. To divide communication and expression into a binary removes the possibility of moving between communication *and* expression, or of a text existing in and of itself rather than for the purposes of one or the other. This is the relevance of the hybrid form; in disregarding or subverting the constraints of form, one can use the conflicts that arise when forms compete to their benefit, allowing the forms to work both individually and collectively across a given work.

Two such hybrid works are Eleni Sikelianos' *The Book of Jon* and Julia Madsen's *Home Movie, Nowhere*. The former, centered on Sikelianos' complex relationship with her late father, is divided into two sections: "The Book of Jon" and "The Book of the Dead." These sections are each compiled of several different forms, including traditional poetry, lists, flash nonfiction, letters, journal entries, and photographs, which allows Sikelianos to move fluidly through time and memories in her attempts to process grief and other complex emotions following her father's death. Rather than a polished, perfectly developed work, *The Book of Jon* recreates the *experience* of remembering by demonstrating the *process* of remembering, relying on thematic connective tissue such as substance abuse, music, and repeated phrases or images to maintain consistency across the text. One key factor in the success of this structure is her "Introductory Note," which establishes a rapport between author and reader by teaching the reader how to interact with the text by directly stating her intentions and the relevance of the work itself. By connecting to the overall human experience, Sikelianos blurs the line between Self and Other, including the reader by presenting the writing process *as the completed work*. The unfinished appearance of the book reflects the multi-step process of writing as well as the experience of remembering, presenting different perceptions of reality as parallel to the process of grieving.

Though the inconsistency of form and content could lead to distrust between author and reader as a result of Sikelianos' inconsistent claims or her unreliable memory, she makes use of editorializing voice or authorial interjection to further the rapport between reader and author, as it allows her to involve the reader directly as she clarifies, corrects, and reworks the text as she writes it. There are many examples of meta commentary throughout the work; some interjections are only brief phrases or sentences that challenge her memories, while others *draw out* memories. The editorializing voice also clarifies different speakers or forms and the reason for

their appearance, used in tandem with individual titles to distinguish fiction from fact, or “Myth / Truth” (Sikelianos 57). This furthers the trust between reader and author *without* limiting the author's writing to strictly fiction or nonfiction, resulting in a surreal tone that is reinforced by her use of poetics throughout the work. There is an inherent suspension of belief when interacting with poetic form, which allows Sikelianos to subvert time and memory through her use of poetics in areas where prosaic writing may have been less effective at communicating the same experience. The poem “Billy the Kid” stands out here as one of the most obvious examples of the role of poetics in this work, highlighting the speaker’s uncertainty and the unreliability of their memory as the driving force of the poem (Sikelianos 34). Rather than working around or through her uncertainty, she highlights it as an integral part of the work, changing the form and genre of the text to align with her needs as writer as well as the needs of the content.

One important note here is that, as *The Book of Jon* is centered on Sikelianos’ personal experiences and relationships, it is not necessary for her to establish an academic ethos; in writing her own experience, she is inherently understood to be the most reliable source, and as such her uncertainty and unreliability as narrator is not detrimental to the text itself. In other contexts, such as when writing on political or cultural subjects (particularly, more current events that may receive mixed opinions), it is extremely important that the author’s ethos is proven and reinforced in an intentional manner. Even in chronological narratives, factors like the author’s selection, organization, and presentation of detail influence the reader’s interpretation of the image or experience being described. In academic writing or other more static forms, the process of establishing ethos is integrated into the form itself via citations and footnotes regarding primary and secondary sources relevant to the content of the work. It is important to note that, in traditional fiction or poetry, this is not necessary if a work does not make claims or arguments

outside of the content of its pages (i.e. any claims made are either supported by the text or do not require external confirmation). However, in nonfiction or hybrid genre texts— particularly those that reference current cultural or political issues—it is extremely important to establish authorial ethos and provide accurate, researched information. Even if one does the research prior to writing, footnotes or other forms of citation are beneficial to the reader’s rapport with the author as well as their understanding of the work as a whole. Here, the distinction between *fact* and *fiction* is extremely relevant.

To discuss this further, we may turn to Julia Madsen’s *Home Movie, Nowhere*, which offers an example of the ways in which one can establish authorial ethos without detracting from the stylistic choices of a text. Madsen makes use of editorializing voice several times throughout the work, using it to redirect the reader or the text itself as well as to clarify possible areas of confusion (one example of this is her use of parenthetical notes stating “(true)” and “(false)” to mark fact from fiction, or concrete experience from exaggeration (Madsen 7)). The untitled fragments appear visually as prose, but read far more poetically, adding a layer of suspended belief and abstraction to the work as she blurs the line between ‘real,’ concrete experiences and surreal, stylized descriptions or memories. In order to balance this suspension of belief, Madsen includes footnotes throughout the work, which allow her to establish ethos by including details or contexts that may have been disruptive to the text itself, adding depth to the work without detracting from the core movement of the piece. In the beginning, these footnotes are academic, serving to contextualize words or phrases that may have been unclear; the first offers an explanation of “Angle Road,” providing historical and personal context for the road’s location and cultural significance (Madsen 3). The second footnote, however, quickly moves into abstractions, establishing the dynamic purpose of the footnotes—rather than offering concrete,

factual information, she describes a dream-like sensory experience that she remembers from her childhood, providing personal context for the content of the text. As the work progresses, the footnotes combine factual or historical information with personal judgments or experiences, allowing Madsen to recount surreal personal experiences without losing touch with the cultural and historical contexts of her work, moving fluidly between fiction and nonfiction.

In considering this second binary, Daniel Chandler argues that the most important and necessary distinction for both consumer and creator is that of nonfiction or fiction (Chandler 11). The issue that I take with this is not the distinction between fact and fiction, but rather the implication of a strict boundary between fiction and nonfiction, or concrete or imagined experience. I argue that despite its continued importance as a marketing category, no written work is actually “nonfiction.” Just as every expression of Self is filtered through external forms and contexts, every attempt to recreate external experiences or events outside of the fictional world is filtered through personal experience, perspective, and opinion, meaning that every act of remembering is a step further from the original experience being remembered. In turn, no personal experience can be treated as concrete or static as it is filtered through the perspective of the Self. Here, we may find it beneficial to refer back to nondualism, or, on a less complex scale, semiotics. The easiest example of this is color: blue is only *blue* insofar as we have collectively agreed that it is so. While one person may see a growth of ‘azure aster’ flowers and identify the visual sensory experience as being associated with the color blue, another may see the same growth and understand it to be purple. Previous sensory experiences can also influence one’s interpretation of their environment, and though there are some ways to identify aspects of sensory experiences as ‘real,’ external confirmation of experience are also filtered through the perspectives of those who offer them, and as such are similarly unreliable.



Every word used in a written text influences both the author's construction of and the reader's interpretation of the word(s) that follow; even if two sentences have no direct correlation, the interpretation of those sentences will differ depending on the individual consumer. Here, meta commentary allows the author to overcome this barrier to an extent, standing between the reader and the text in order to clarify content or stylistic choices where needed. By recognizing the shortcomings of the text within the text itself, a rapport is established between author and reader, offering the reader insight to the writing process and intentions behind the text with less risk of misinterpretation. So, if the Self and its perception are influenced by their external environment, and if the Self's ability to interpret that environment is influenced by bias and other inconsistencies, there are several layers of removal between 'reality' and one's experience of it. In turn, we can assume that 'reality,' or the Self's experience of it, is fictional; this means that the Self, too—being constructed of its experiences or memories—is fictionalized. There is no true Self, but rather a collective series of occurrences that present themselves as being experienced by one particular Self or many individual Selves, which are unreal insofar as they cannot be proven to exist within reality; the category of 'nonfiction' is arbitrary at best.

In considering these ideas, I have written this thesis in a fragmented form which moves fluidly between poetry and prose, using the theoretical framework of nondualism to examine the complications that arise in distinguishing fiction from nonfiction, specifically in the use of dreams or nightmares as a juxtaposition to 'reality.' There are six clearly differentiated sections, broken up by individual pieces that either stand alone or in small pairs as a bridge between ideas. The majority of these pieces are written in poetic forms to indicate abstract experiences and emotions (i.e. "Winter Solstice, Point Hope, Alaska," and "Recitation"). Full poems such as these represent moments of death, rebirth, or detachment due to the suspension of belief that poetic

form affords, which contrasts the more concrete experience presented in prose. As such, there are several fragments that appear in poetic forms in order to integrate ideas of nonreality earlier on in the work. As the line between reality and nonreality is increasingly challenged throughout the thesis, so is the line between poetry and prose, representing the gradual misalignment of Self and experience as the Self becomes separated from shared experiences, or ‘reality.’

The opening piece, “Ars Poetica / The Magician,” establishes motifs and images that are carried throughout the thesis, such as death, water, motherhood, and time. Similarly to Sikelianos’ “Introductory Note,” this piece is intended to teach the reader how to interact with the text; the two fragments, ‘The Container’ and ‘The Voice,’ establish the hybrid form and fragmented structure that will follow throughout the rest of the work, directing the reader from a clear starting point. This also establishes the binary pattern that presents itself throughout the work, particularly in the context of fiction versus nonfiction. “The Container” introduces the question of form and structure, which I understand as loosely correlating to nonfiction and prose; this is because a container is generally experienced by everything in it, which is why the fragment is largely focused on concrete objects rather than abstractions. “The Voice,” on the other hand, is representative of the Self, or singular experiences, which I understand as being unique to the individual (i.e. dreams, nightmares, memories, etc.) and loosely correlating to fiction and poetry.

After this opening piece, the fragments begin with a focus on motherhood, which is used throughout the thesis as a touchstone from which to develop motifs of love, responsibility, environmentalism, death or rebirth, and nondualism. In tandem with motherhood, love works as the driving force of this thesis, and the many types of love and their use in creative writing offers a rich history of forms and contexts to work with or against. Another important through-line in

the work is the repetition of certain images or ideas, the most common being water; this choice was made with the intention of highlighting the fluidity and adaptability of water, including its cyclical movement through different stages and its various purposes (i.e. hydration, cleansing, etc.). This fluidity also parallels the fluidity of poetry and prose throughout my thesis, which is furthered by the variety and ambiguity of form used throughout the work; the framework of nondualism is essential to its movement through these forms, and is intertwined with the concepts of motherhood and love that are introduced in the first set of fragments (“Celtic Cross Spread / The Queen of Cups”). The use of the editorializing voice works in tandem with the fragments to create a sense of instability that intensifies as the work progresses. As in *The Book of Jon*, these interruptions add an intentionally unfinished or unfiltered appearance to the work, imitating the continuous nature of the cycle of death and rebirth; some appear as direct addresses to ‘you,’ whereas others appear as the Self’s attempt to redirect or challenge the words of the past or future Self. Both forms of interruption are presented in brackets throughout the thesis; in order to differentiate these interruptions, those directed at the Self are included in italics, whereas those directed to the Other are included in plain text.

Nondualism has influenced this work in many ways, one of which being the use of the unspecified ‘you’ throughout the work. This ‘you’ shifts over time and across subjects, but generally refers to our collective humanity; there are some areas where an addressee can be assumed via form or other indicators—such as “A Moment of Hope in Winter / The Sun,” which addresses a romantic partner and loosely follows the sonnet form—but for the majority of the work, this ‘you’ is intended to be understood as referring to a collective whole, or a singular, nondual consciousness. Another way to look at this would be through the existential lens of Sartre’s Self v. Other, identifying the author as Self and the reader, or the general ‘you,’ as Other.

Over time, the line between Self and Other fades, leading the ‘you’ to appear more often further into the work. This furthers the fluidity of genre and form throughout the work, allowing poetry and prose to become more alike in language and movement as reality and nonreality grow harder to differentiate. This is also reinforced in the use of form and organization throughout the work; as the Self and their concept of reality unravels, so do the consistency of form and organization, destabilizing alongside the Self to reflect the impact of perspective on experience.

One of the main concerns in writing this thesis was the distinction between fact and fiction where necessary (notably, *not* fiction from nonfiction), particularly in the context of more current or political subjects (i.e. the war in Gaza, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, etc.). There are several areas where the text contradicts itself, such as in the opening section: “[Please forgive me: I have lied / about everything].” This is intentional, with the purpose of highlighting the speaker’s confusion and the unraveling of Self and reality; however, it also undercuts the authorial ethos of the work. In order to address this concern, I included footnotes throughout the thesis in a similar form to those of Julia Madsen in *Home Movie, Nowhere*. As they are intended to further the effect of the text itself, these footnotes become more abstract as the work progresses, serving as editorializing clarifications, interrupting questions, and authorial reflections where needed. However, at the beginning of the thesis, these footnotes are used academically to provide sources and further context for factual or fact-based claims, establishing authorial ethos despite the speaker’s uncertainty.

In writing this thesis, I have demonstrated that the presentation and organization of content, specifically in the context of poetry and prose and their respective affordances and constraints, can be blurred and subverted in such a way that challenges both social and aesthetic forms, in turn influencing the writing process as well as reader interpretation of the text. Any

attempt to isolate poetry from prose, expression from communication, or fiction from nonfiction is antithetical to the process of creating through language. To restrict a text to one form or genre inevitably results in the exclusion and inclusion of different details based not on importance or relevance, but on purpose and audience, inhibiting the possibility of the text challenging social or aesthetic forms. Why should we as writers restrict ourselves to one form or genre in any given text, to labels of fiction or nonfiction in the process of writing, when there are no concrete realities or definitions in which we are able to ground ourselves? When we live in a framework of social forms that restrict our collective existence, why should we work within those forms that are less strictly reinforced?

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[Ars Poetica]

*[The Magician]**[The Container— ]*

Consider the jar, the vase, an old wooden box of ashes with a quote etched on the side, a plain cardboard box, a room, cell, a prison; consider the movement of water, the way it shapes itself to the container, the way it fills the space in which it finds itself; consider the shipping container or vehicle or makeup compact, the mirror, the screen, door frames, storm clouds; the hurricane, the tornado; consider the womb, grave, mausoleum, skull, body—

*[The Voice— ]*

Consider the tarot; who is querent, and who reads? What past is relevant, and how could the present affect the future? Clear your head, try again; imagine the Self an observer, each card offering itself to you as a singularity in communion with the rest of the deck and the situation at hand. How do they speak to each other? Consider the beginning, the mother, mothers—would you be able to put that feeling to words? Trust you will understand when you need to; trust you will not forget your roots, that water will continue to flow through your hands and blood through your body; try to remember the body is temporary, is not meant to last forever—

[Celtic Cross Spread]<sup>1</sup>

[*The Queen of Cups*]

- I. *Mother* as homemaker, provider of food, purity, warmth, comfort; she sweeps the kitchen floor and hums to the sound of the bathtub overflowing. She is caretaker, provider of love and safety and heat, rocking infant as vomit stains the shoulder of her old cotton t-shirt. She stands in the foyer and watches water seep from the bathroom door, still holding the baby, unaware that water has risen to her ankles, only hearing the peaceful sound of running water, unaware the child stopped crying hours ago.
  
- II. *Mother* as women in Palestine using old fabric scraps as pads and taking pills to stop their periods,<sup>2</sup> crying for joy when fresh rainwater runs from the corner of the tent into their children's empty cups— *Mother* also as women whose children were and are suffocating under the rubble of safe zones, bombed on the night of the Super Bowl, which an estimated 50% of Americans watched from the comfort of their homes over cheese boards and beer not out of ignorance or malice, but a lack of power— *Mother* as the classmates of those same children in Gaza picking through rubble for bricks to build shelter, as children caring for each other as mothers and fathers and ghosts as their parents and siblings and friends continue to die around them, in front of them, in their arms, as university students are forced out of classrooms and into hiding because there are no universities left to attend,<sup>3</sup> the few lucky enough to have flour baking bread on fires lit in the remains of their homes—

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<sup>1</sup> 1. The situation / 2. The current challenges affecting the issue / 3. The basis of the situation / 4. The past relevant to the situation / 5. The present / 6. The near future / 7. Your power in the situation / 8. The effects of the people around you / 9. Your hopes or fears / 10. The outcome

<sup>2</sup> Batrawy, Aya and Bashir, Abu Bakr. "Another layer of misery: Women in Gaza struggle to find menstrual pads, running water." *NPR*, 11 Jan. 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Desai, Chandni. "The War in Gaza Is Wiping out Palestine's Education and Knowledge Systems." *The Conversation*, 13 Mar. 2024.

III. A loved one told me that the water wars would happen first and I imagined bodies, everywhere, parched throats and cracked, bleeding lips, empty hands clawing at dry earth and dead trees, crying out for pure water. Time passed and now I see that the wars are already here, and they are unfamiliar to me; Israel has flooded the earth below Gaza with salt water,<sup>4</sup> ruining the land's fertility, its hope for rebirth [but we should have known this was coming, should have remembered the ancient Roman practice of salting the earth]; sea water continues to flow through tunnels as civilians die, starving bodies too weak to claw at anything but their own throats—

IV. On February 8th, 2024, a group of children killed Nex Benedict on the floor of their high school bathroom.<sup>5</sup> Severe head injuries were reported, and there was probably blood on the tile. Their death was ruled suicide by the autopsy [I don't believe this];<sup>6</sup> the children who killed them will probably have nightmares about the blood, those children who had mothers, have mothers, are alive and safe with their mothers—

Death has a mother, too; hate is always born of some other thing, and we're all guilty in its continuation. Those children will likely not be tried or charged for murder, and the faculty who neglected to report the bullying are likely to have long and fruitful careers, and Nex will be another name on a long list of trans bodies, disposable examples of what not to do with the life God gave you—

[Mother, I know you want grandchildren, but they are killing us in our sleep; the bodies are not so far from here—we cannot act as if we are alone in this world.]

*[Go back to the beginning, before the bodies were everything]*

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<sup>4</sup> “Flooding Hamas Tunnels with Seawater Risks ‘Ruining Basic Life in Gaza’, Says Expert.” *The Guardian, Guardian News and Media*, 23 Dec. 2023.

<sup>5</sup> “Oklahoma Banned Trans Students from Bathrooms. Now a Bullied Student Is Dead.” *The Independent, Independent Digital News and Media*, 24 Feb. 2024.

<sup>6</sup> “LGBTQ Teen Nex Benedict Died by Suicide, Medical Examiner Says.” *MSN, ABC News*, 14 Mar. 2024.



- V. Listen: I need to tell you that once, I did want to be a mother. I still think in a perfect world I could, but listen, please: when I tell the story of the woman in the flooded kitchen, screaming infant cradled as vomit runs down her back, I am remembering myself. I heard our heartbeats race as water pooled; I knew it was floodwater because I heard the crack of the bathroom window, and still I did nothing as I watched water spread across the floor, soaking the bottom of my socks, but none of it was real; I need you to understand, nothing can be trusted—

[Please forgive me: I have lied  
about everything]

- VI. *[Try again: Start with something real, something concrete]*

So let me be honest—

I don't want to write about motherhood, or beginnings; I don't have anything new to add to the conversation, which is why I started with the bathtub. I don't want children [is this true?] but even if I did I can't afford it, nor can I justify bringing new life into the world to watch it burn. It is hard enough to care for myself; I can't commit to such a responsibility. When *Roe v. Wade* was overturned I ordered a box of 50 Plan-B pills online, not because I needed them, but because I didn't know if I'd be able to get them in the future. My mom helped with the cost, and she was the one to suggest the purchase—not because she thought I needed them, but because she saw it as a necessary precaution to take. There are other cards to play, but I forgot to vote in the primaries this year, and I worry most of my peers did too. It's hard to keep up; the world moves too fast [she is trying to outrun us].<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Carter, Jamie. "Earth Is Suddenly Spinning Faster. Why Our Planet Just Recorded Its Shortest Day since Records Began." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 12 Oct. 2022.

VII. *Motherhood:*

1. the state of being a mother, maternity; having or relating to an inherent worthiness, justness, or goodness that is obvious or unarguable;
2. a given title after successfully reproducing, in turn marking the childbearing body with an inherent worthiness, justness, or goodness;
3. the only promise of worth provided by the womb-bearing body, made to feed and protect said womb, worthiness, goodness and, inevitably, child.

VIII. So, if I cannot have children of my own, I will live my life as if every living body is my child, as if every death is my death—I accept a responsibility for the Other, in service of both the Self and her counterparts. The existence of a Self at all is debatable, but I do not have time for that kind of introspection right now. All you need to know is I have adopted the belief that there is no Self or Other; there are only fragments, individual parts that add to one whole;<sup>8</sup> so, where Others feel fear or pain, I, too, feel these things. A mother does not forget her children.

[This is not true for all mothers, but I will be different; I have to remember— ]

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<sup>8</sup> “‘No Self’ Explained by Nagasena and the Chariot Parable.” *Happy Buddha Life*, 4 Nov. 2023.

## IX. [To my children, my loves, my little birds— ]

1. *Hold out your empty hands.* Try, if you can, to imagine motherhood as something that can be held. Try to remember, then, that nothing is permanent; every child dies and every mother deserves to die before her child [you will learn this one day, as every child does], but all we can do is watch the cracks spread like forked rivers. Try to pretend it is beautiful when we are drowned and salt is the everything left in our rotting, waterlogged bodies.

*[Maybe none of this is about mothers; maybe it is about death and rebirth, or love—and isn't love a form of rebirth? Isn't life just a series of deaths, each one easier than the last?]*

2. Have I told you about the honeysuckle, the sickly sweet scent that fills the air in spring infecting everything around you, everything you breathe? My neighbor and I, no more than ten, used to pick the flowers and squeeze nectar into our mouths like candy. The vines were laced through a chain link fence on the sidewalk, pale yellow and white flowers with long, syrup-filled stigma open towards the road, inviting greedy hands and tongues. Then was the motorcycle accident [the first of many deaths], but I don't know if it's my story to tell. I never knew him and I don't know the details—our parents sheltered us well, as did all the neighborhood families—but I know he died, and I remember when signs were posted: *STOP SPEEDING* and *CHILDREN AT PLAY*. Speed bumps were installed and we stayed in more often. This is how I learned the world could change around me, in spite of me: we were not allowed to walk alone to the park at the end of the road, and if we played outside, the streets were off-limits.

[Ambiance]

*[Page of Wands]*

Today, I saw  
leaves dancing  
in sunlight, swaying  
back and forth, trying to  
balance on the wind's  
beating rhythm.  
Sometimes, I wish  
I could rise to meet them,  
learn the steps of their  
dance; sometimes,  
I like to pretend  
I have wings  
and can float, but  
I never learned  
to pretend at flight—  
and so I wait,  
allowing my body  
to be caught  
in the upswing  
of the breeze. Try  
as I might, I cannot  
maintain the rhythm,  
but I dance all the same  
because sometimes,  
drugs are sweet  
like candy or  
suicides, and some-  
times wind bites  
like an unfinished  
sentence tears a voice,  
leaving an itch that  
only grows, peeling  
layer after layer  
of parched soul  
from the lining  
of the throat.

[Possibilities Spread]<sup>9</sup>

[*Strength*]

- I. When Shelby died, there wasn't any warning, or closure. [There still isn't—maybe this is why everything comes back to her, to that cold month]. This is the first time that grief tore through my body, and it left nothing. I couldn't make the drive to the funeral, and even then I didn't feel it was my right to attend. Grief of that nature was and is still foreign to me. I still don't know if I made the right decision. It's complicated. These things happen, and as with all things, it too passed. Not the memories or the grief, but the pain, to an extent. I understand why she did what she did, and I've never felt any resentment towards her. Like me, she needed an escape, and she found one. I hope it was peaceful.
  
- II. I keep returning to that day in the graveyard, when we sat under the oak tree and painted the gravestones and the flora around us. I am circling the memory, searching for what I know isn't there—there was no path, so we tried to avoid the spots of land where we thought the bodies may lie, so as not to disturb the confederate soldiers buried there. I hope she is offered the same kindness in her next life that she gifted the world. In this version of my memory, I wonder if their bones feel cold as we do, as I do when I feel that my body, too, has died; like water, this memory is hard to hold, and it falls through my open fingers without forgiveness; this, too, will die; this, too, is fleeting—

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<sup>9</sup> 1. Where am I now? / 2. What will expand my horizons? / 3. What can I learn from my current situation? / 4. What can I learn from others?

- III. Please don't be alarmed by my words here; try to understand, I only want to tell the truth, which is that I am too afraid to commit to such an act. I won't say her choice was brave because that is not my judgment to pass. Her story is not mine to tell, so long as it is told. You shouldn't find malice in these words, but if you have, let me be clear: her death was my death—irreversible. I do not lay claim to any grief or loss that is not mine, I know what is mine—I only mean that I am becoming like those hungry ghosts,<sup>10</sup> and my eyes have lost their sight—I am only trying to see again, I am only trying to feel love again—
- IV. I keep returning to Sisyphus, or rather / to cycles, and the ways things end / or don't. I am returning, too, to my mother, and to dogs / and bones, and the times I watched my father press / the family dog's nose to its own mess on the rug, / over and over until they learned *NO*, / with every dog, over and over, / because it always worked—

[This, too, is how we learned fear.]

*[Is it harder to die or to be reborn? Is there a difference? Does it matter?]*

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<sup>10</sup> According to Buddhist philosophy, there are 6 paths of existence; we are reborn into one of these paths each time we die. The position of this rebirth is determined by the balance of good or bad karma from our previous lives. The 5th path, right above Hell, is the Path of the Hungry Ghosts, of which there are 36 types, each suffering uniquely as a result of their various sins [generally to do with food or other resources]. This is the realm of the greedy, who walk on earth among humans; they are said to live for 500 years, each day equating to a month of human time.

[Winter Solstice, Point Hope, Alaska]<sup>11</sup>

*[IV of Cups]*

Close your eyes—  
everything  
is here, and quiet.

The moon is  
gentle, and the snow  
is soft like

a child's  
hands. I am happy  
in the dark.

I don't want  
the sun anymore.  
Her glare cuts

my eyes and  
they water, drip salt  
tears to make

me afraid,  
and again I am  
a child,

begging my  
mother to eat me  
so that I

can be warm again  
in the dark  
of her belly, a  
parasite.

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<sup>11</sup> Seasons are caused by the tilt of the earth's axis; solstices and equinoxes, too, are a symptom of her imbalance. Two equinoxes per year mark the sun's alignment with the equator; these signify the transition from summer to fall, or winter to spring. [I understand these days, the seasons of fall and spring, to be liminal in nature]. Solstices mark the opposite, the sun's farthest movement to the north or south of the equator; the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, signifies the beginning of winter. [I understand this to be a form of death, or rebirth].

[Horseshoe Spread]<sup>12</sup>

[*The Empress*]

- I. I've used birth control since I was a teenager, mainly for the sake of regulating my hormones; this offers some protection from the risk of pregnancy, but it isn't perfect. As a child, pregnancy wasn't as large of a source of anxiety, but at that point, the world wasn't so scary—I wanted to have children one day, I planned it out in detail; I would've had two boys, though I can't tell you why. My friends and I played house, discussed baby names; now, even writing this terrifies me. Almost as if to say something, or worse, to write it, is to make it real. I got an IUD last August and it's supposed to last 10 years, but every month, the fear underlines everything I do. I've been told the risk of ectopic pregnancy increases with IUDs, but I'm not sure on the statistics—research into women's healthcare is unreliable at best, nonexistent at worst. Either way, the fear takes a new form. There was no anesthesia with the procedure and it left no visible injury, but it felt like a hot knife through my body, and I bled for several days. We have made this world dangerous, and there is so much to be afraid of.

*[Be specific—what do you fear?  
Where do you see danger? Is it red?]*

- II. Of the womb-bearing bodies that attended my high school, at least four have had children [I understand this to mean that they have died]. More, I'm sure, are trying, and still more will have grandchildren by the age of 40. The oldest student in my graduating class must be no more than twenty-three by now, though I can't be sure. Two that I know of have had hysterectomies and are no longer fertile. I've considered applying for the surgery, but I'm afraid of that, too; I don't have time to heal, and I can't afford an unneeded trip to the hospital. I am safe for ten years. That needs to be enough for now; there are some deaths that I can't look in the eyes. In August, I will have nine left. I will be twenty-two years old.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> 1. Influences from the past / 2. Present situation and circumstances / 3. Influences on the horizon / 4. Advice going forward / 5. Surroundings / 6. Potential obstacles / 7. Final outcome

<sup>13</sup> It is believed that Mother Mary was between the ages of 12 and 14 when she gave birth to her first son, Jesus. Though asexual reproduction in humans has not been scientifically documented [to my knowledge], parthenogenesis has been observed in some species of reptile [i.e. komodo dragons, whiptail lizards, etc.] as well as many insect species [i.e. wasps, bees, stick bugs, etc.].



- III. On my first introduction to my coworker's newborn, he was in a stroller, sleeping peacefully. This time, she held him in her arms as I approached, offering the child without warning, assuming I would want to hold it. I took him in my arms and cradled his head in the bend of my elbow, tense, afraid, and realized it was the first time I'd held one [an infant] in years. He was chubby, with thick arms and legs and a pudgy face, and when I considered the whole, it made sense; just a smaller person, a bite-sized version of his mother, of me. Tiny person. Infant. But when I looked at his arms and legs, the body seemed to lose its humanity, likening itself to an overstuffed cushion. It moved a lot, and the skull was heavier than the rest of the body; the body itself was heavier than I had expected. It was quiet, and for a moment, I enjoyed holding him in my arms [I understand this to be a new form of death, of fear]. Still, in seconds, fear bubbled to the surface—

*[Is this contagious? How long can I hold this child before my body produces one of its own? What if it already has?]*

- IV. There is something about pregnant bodies that strikes fear. Not the bodies themselves, but the wombs, the way they bulge like a heavy balloon knit to the stomach, pulling everything to earth, grounding everything, preventing flight. The womb wants the egg to live and the body is collateral in a slow, tedious process of consumption, of reabsorption; the fetus wants to live, and it drains the life from the body without knowledge of consequence. From the beginning, the relationship is parasitic; the cells eat the mother, stealing her teeth, bones, skin, autonomy, every aspect of control that she may have had before the implantation. For nine months and the rest of your life, pregnancy irreversibly alters the body and mind—and isn't motherhood only a continuation of this consumption, this symbiotic reliance, this nonduality?

*[How does this end? What am I trying to find?]*

- V. I don't have any direct experience with pregnancies or the complications that come with them. My brother was born in 2005; I was only 3 years old at the time, so I don't remember much. I know my mother had a miscarriage before him, I think while my father was deployed, but I never asked for details. The closest I've been to that kind of loss was more recent; a friend told me that a different friend was pregnant [she wanted the baby, and had been trying for some time], and visibly so. During a recent wellness visit, she was told the pregnancy is no longer viable; in the past, this would've been addressed by an abortive surgery,<sup>14</sup> but she was told to wait a week to see if a miscarriage would naturally occur—it is guaranteed that the body will miscarry; the fetus is 'a runny egg yolk,' and has no chance of life—and two weeks later the body refuses to let go, refuses to accept the loss; the mother feels she is 'a walking morgue'—
- VI. The fallopian tube snakes through the body, stealing the egg from the ovaries. From here, the egg can and will implant anywhere that it grabs hold. [The egg is not autonomous in this process, but can be understood as guilty by association]. The body betrays the body, giving way to multiplicity, divided states of being as self and as other(s); waking in two bodies, living and walking and dying as two bodies—the mother is gifted one life only to offer it wholly to another—but is it ever an offering, or is it an act of submission, of conceding? The body consumes itself like a rat consuming poison, thinking only of its hunger. [Is not the womb, too, a hungry ghost?] Some sacrifices refuse reason, patience— I would rather meet death than this, but isn't motherhood, too, a form of death? Is not the mother herself another hungry ghost?

*[What deaths has she seen, unknown to the child?]*

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<sup>14</sup> On June 24, 2022, the Supreme Court ruled to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, which had federally protected the individual's right to choose to abort their pregnancy [this case also protected many other aspects of bodily autonomy and women's healthcare]. Pre-established trigger laws in thirteen states—some immediate, some delayed by 30 or 90 days—were then moved through as legislation, restricting access to necessary healthcare and resources.

VII. [An Interview]<sup>15</sup> [Temperance]

*When did you stop believing in a higher power?*

As a child, I prayed each time I heard a siren.  
I thought maybe, if I shut my eyes and begged  
on my knees, God would save them.

*Would you rather pray to a God that can't hear you  
or a God that won't listen?*

It hasn't snowed yet in Tennessee, but it's been raining  
for a week. Every morning curls of fog rise from pavement  
in thin layers of velvet, filling the valley.

*I've noticed everything is softer after it rains,  
as if the world is holding her breath.*

Last night, an apartment down the street caught fire.  
We couldn't see the flames, but I heard the sirens  
and we watched emergency lights flash through my  
bedroom window and I thought about the gas station  
where I buy my cigarettes and the family-owned  
barbeque place a block over.

*If you had to choose, would you rather slow-cook  
in an apartment fire or freeze in a snowstorm?*

Everything here repeats itself—the same faded streetlights  
and fast food and unhoused bodies filling empty space  
between buildings. The sun was bright in my eyes the next day,  
but I saw the apartment's balcony; it was a dense, crisp brown  
that bled onto the neighboring units.

I thought it would be quiet when we moved away from the city,  
but my love, there are so many sirens, and I haven't slept in days.

*I don't know if I ever believed in God,  
but I've started praying again.*

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<sup>15</sup> Laux, Dorianne. "After Twelve Days of Rain." *What We Carry*. BOA Editions, 1994.

[Possibilities Spread]

[*The Hanged Man*]

- I. I wasn't always afraid of death, but I am now. Nothing is foolproof. It doesn't take long to die; it's all perspective. But you need to understand, I am not afraid of Death herself [*why is Death always a woman?*] and I am not afraid of my own death; I have died many times over in this life, and I expect to see many more. As a child, my father was in the military—Army, then Air Force—and was deployed many times, first in Afghanistan, then wherever else they needed him. I was still too young to understand why, or what happened those months he was gone, but I was old enough to understand the importance of saying *Goodbye* and *I Love You* every time he left.
  
- II. My father retired from the military my senior year of high school, or maybe right after graduation—the exact date is blurry, as are most memories from those last years in my parent's home. It isn't their fault; my memory was unreliable to begin with, and I made a lot of decisions that should've had worse consequences than they did. I know PTSD can be genetic; they've studied the generations after Holocaust survivors, and trauma alters the structure of the brain in ways that I don't understand and likely never will—something about paths in the brain and emotional regulation, I think—but I don't think my father's trauma was passed down in this way, or could have been; I was born right before he left for Afghanistan. Instead, I see it in myself in the way I enter a room, and how I position myself—always in clear view of the exit, always able to see everyone around me—and I see it in the way I listen, the way that small shifts in sound or atmosphere trigger my freeze response, which is why I need to be able to identify the source of a sound before I can accept it as real, as safe.
  1. When I was a child, I used to sit cross-legged at my bedroom door and press my ear to the wood, holding my breath, trying to hear my parents fighting. Once, I heard them exchanging words and it sounded intense—I opened the door, afraid, only to find silence: the peaceful living were watching TV at a low volume so as not to disturb myself or my brother, and the dogs were asleep on the living room floor. They told me everything was fine, but for many nights I continued to sit late at night at my bedroom door, just to be sure—

2. I'm used to being told I'm too quiet, being asked to speak louder, to project or amplify my voice—how can I explain in simple words that in the second house, after we moved, my room was right above my parents', and if I woke in the middle of the night and moved to use the bathroom, my father would hear my footsteps like thunder, even when I learned silence, even when I began to tip-toe during the day, in the homes of my friends, even now, in my own apartment—

III. My father was deployed in Afghanistan the year after I was born, which included the date of my first birthday party. As I hadn't developed critical thought yet, it didn't make much of a difference to me, at least as far as I remember [but you should know I don't remember the occasion itself, which is generally true for most birthdays, though I'm not sure why]. To make up for his absence, he ordered a stuffed dog online, which was delivered to our home via cardboard box. It sits at about four or five feet long [somehow, he didn't realize this when he ordered it—he assumed it would be a regular sized stuffed dog]; at the time, I was far more interested in the cardboard box it arrived in than I was in the toy itself [though I did love it dearly]. I named it after our golden retriever, Darby, who passed away over a decade ago [I remember her more in stories than I do in memories themselves: she used to sit under the table and clean up my messy table scraps—my parents always joked that she was 'like a vacuum']. The stuffed dog sat at the foot of my bed for most of my life; to my mother's dismay, I loved it so much that I even gave it haircuts under the assumption that the hair would grow back. This year, it will be 21 years old, almost twice the expected life-span of a golden retriever; but I've been careless with the things I love, and at this point, I don't know where to start with its recovery. For now, it sits on a shelf in one of our storage closets. It smells of cat pee, but it won't fit in our top-loading washing machine, and if I'm being honest, I'm worried that it may be beyond saving.

- IV. It's been four years since my grandfather's funeral, and the only moisturizer I use is Pond's, a stout jar with a sky blue screw-on lid. My memories of the day are blurry—I wasn't particularly sad, just a bit overwhelmed. Strangers offered me their hands and condolences and told me how they knew my family. We sat in a stuffy chapel with high ceilings and far more people than I'd expected to attend, for no reason other than the fact that I hadn't realized how much life he lived.

The easiest memory of the funeral: two older women stand in the pew in front of mine discussing a third woman, older than both of them. The subject of their discourse sits further ahead—I never see her face, and nothing about her appearance strikes me; I assume she is old and frail, but she faces away from the pews. One of the closer women spouts her disbelief at the other's young complexion, touching her own face as if her wrinkles are a harsher reminder of her mortality than the death of my grandfather. I don't feel angry for this—if anything, amused—I understand, she's just another woman who's learned bitterness. [For a long time, I remembered them crediting Ponds moisturizer for her wrinkle-free complexion, but I don't trust this to be true]. It ends as all memories do: people swarming the aisles, slowly filing out of the only exit, the two women chatting and the third, oblivious.

*[I am curious how this changes our karmic balance—am I a part of their sin? What sin have they committed? What is mine?]*

[Discourse on Beauty]      *[III of Swords]*

Back in the Renaissance, women used paint  
and ammonia to turn their faces white, like corpses,  
and the juice of deadly nightshade to dilate  
their pupils and make their eyes more seductive.  
Nowadays, kids prefer acid. At seventeen,  
a friend and I drove to Colorado to meet another  
friend or lover on his family vacation.  
That doesn't have much to do with beauty  
except for the mountains were gorgeous, and the shrooms  
made our pupils large and seductive,  
so we had a good time. I almost stepped on a baby rattlesnake  
on the hiking trail, but I didn't, so I lived

and we drove back two weeks later after the 4th of July,  
counting the cop cars en route to East Tennessee. Now  
we live a few hours from Atlanta off a main road,  
one police station on each end; the sirens never stop,  
and something about the flash of blue and red  
makes it hard to sleep at night the same way  
the news does, you know like when they talk about  
drag queen story time and the new lack of permit  
requirements to own and carry a gun over the age of 21,  
concealed or not, on a university campus or not, so now  
students can bring guns to my 8 a.m. lecture or the bathroom,

where everyone is too distracted by bloodstains  
and trans bodies to notice the bullet holes dotting the hallways  
and the bathroom stalls. I learned how to shoot a gun  
before I got my first period, and if you'll listen, the list  
keeps going and it only gets worse, so you might as well  
roll a nice joint to ease your mind before we legalize weed  
and tax it to fund the military. Once you've smoked  
and tossed the filter, the FDA recommends keeping your head down  
and your knees tucked like a fetus [a smaller target  
in case your neighbor is the victim or cause of the next mass shooting  
that everyone will forget because we're all too tired  
of running in circles like blind, headless, flightless birds.

[What We Remember]

[*The Lovers*][*After Sarah Manguso*]

Who told you it was easy to live a life? In the middle of the night you might wake to a velvet sky, drenched in sweat from another dream about Chicago and the wind and them walking beside you in the wind, just as you ask about a poem, just as you say it's about life being life and death trying to die—what if every night you wake at 2 a.m. just before they tell you the name, just as the wind roars and forces you to close your eyes? *L'amour ressemble plus à cela qu'à la petite mort*. Everything wants to die and love prevents it. *Tout le monde veut être amoureux et la mort l'en empêche*. Every night you dream of walking alone on the riverfront, never knowing the name of the poem or their eyes, trying and failing to light cigarettes in the wind, alone, cold—

[Wheel of Fortune]<sup>16</sup>

The road is more water than asphalt, which is not to say it is flooded, but rather that I hydroplane and suddenly I am walking on water. Would you still believe me if I said it was storming and I couldn't see for miles, and then the sky was bright again? The bridge is more water than asphalt, but it won't flood; it leaks from everything on the other side of Chattanooga; it drips from the eaves of the Walnut St. Bridge into polluted freshwater, the Tennessee River.

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<sup>16</sup> In spite of itself, the world keeps turning. I'm trying to learn about moderation, but as with everything, it happens in stages. Too much time, effort, love offered to one thing, not enough to another. Cut back, redistribute, and so it continues—the cycle perpetuates itself. How can I practice moderation when there is so much to learn, to feel, to love? Why is there so little time? When will I stop running out of time?



## [IX of Swords]

*[Upright]*

Tonight, everything is disturbed,  
 exhausted—the metal awning squeaks  
 like a rusty swing—a bird like an arrow  
 shrieks beside me and a child screams  
 again, one resounding beat through air  
 like a ripple pushing water—a gunshot  
 or a blown tire—the child screams again,  
 because the child always screams again—

*Add to the list of hallucinations:*

*small mouse, weak, dying,  
 and the rat, too, darting  
 feline shadow—*

*[Reversed]*

The ground is soft, and sinks a little  
 underfoot. Dark brown and green and dirt  
 and moss, muck water begins to leak  
 from below but it is quiet but for the bubbling  
 earth; there is still time to go forward, cautious—  
 breathe softly, don't cry—you need the water,  
 weak as you are, tired, dried salt—

[Recitation]                    *[The Star]*

*[for Shelby, with love, always—         ]*

I give you this to take with you: / Nothing remains as it was. If you know  
this, you can / begin again, with pure joy in the uprooting. [Judith Minty,  
*Letters to my Daughters*]

I read the news, I read the obituary. A dog takes a bone  
from his owner's hand and hides it under an oak tree,  
and in the morning he waits on the porch, dead bird in mouth.  
Slowly, gently, he places it at the door, wings snapped

and feathers split. It's an old story, an old dog; I've used  
all my tricks. Since you ask, most days I can't remember  
the dimple on your right cheek when you smile, or your  
church-bell laugh over morning coffee. I read the news,

I read the obituary again, and the living keep living.  
In the morning I wash and dress my wounds in paper  
mache and salt. The mirror weeps and the air is thick  
with condensation. A dog whines outside the window.  
I hang my towel on its hook. All my bones are dry.

*[The High Priestess]*

My loves, / my darlings, / my little birds, / Listen: /  
 Nothing matters / but love / Don't try to name it /  
 that sweet sadness / Love is all there is / All there is  
 room for / My darlings / make room for her / Turn  
 on the lights in every room / Open the curtains /  
 then the windows / Stand outside in the rain / Do  
 not dry your feet / Let water seep through your  
 shoes / Let the house breathe through open windows  
 / Run your hand along the white plaster of the  
 hallway / Let her hold you / Thank her for holding  
 you / Listen: / It's okay / Love is all there is /  
 Nothing else matters / Forgive yourself for all of the  
 forgetting / Try again / Make room for love—

[A Brief Exchange at 3 a.m.]

*[The Moon]*

The sky splits open again and the room  
 turns blue: he turns with wide green eyes to ask,  
*What's all the noise outside? Where did all  
 this water come from?* I say in simple terms  
 it's only a storm, nothing to be afraid of, but still  
 he turns to face the window, leaving the warm  
 blanket where his body had slept by my belly  
 to grow cold despite the easing rain.

[Ace of Pentacles]

Do you remember when rain in Chattanooga  
smelled like asphalt and cut grass?

What do you know of storm clouds, of the way  
they form? Feel the humid air condense, folding

layers of wool pulling everything down to the muggy,  
bubbling earth; consider floods, the Great flood,

or tornados—consider the way wind dies or freezes  
in the eye, and the eye's obsession with violence,

her fixation on death, loss, pain, grief—remember  
tornadoes tearing through Clarksville, killing dozens

on the other side of the state; here, we were not at risk  
of a real tornado, but were granted flooding and severe

thunderstorms. Consider the fires in Maui, for which sirens  
were sounded too late if at all, leaving thousands of families

drifting from hotel to hotel nearly six months later,  
unable to rest or rebuild. I don't know anyone in Hawaii,

but I know Shelby's family lives in Clarksville, as do others  
who I won't name here. My family's home lost power

but no walls or lives as they were not in the path  
of the tornado. Others in the same city were less lucky.

This is the way things are; we can't keep trying  
to predict the turning of the wheel, and the ocean  
is trying to evaporate—

[Identity Spread]<sup>17</sup>[*The Chariot*]

- I. When I lived with my parents in Knoxville, we never swam in the river. It wasn't uncommon to hear stories of dead cows floating in the water—one of the consequences of living near the power plant in Oak Ridge—and I imagine them belly-up, catching bits of algae and sticks as they pass. Though less reliable, there were also rumors that several years ago, the river glowed neon green. I don't know which story I believe in either, but I know that we never trusted the water; it wasn't worth the risk. It isn't neon green anymore if it ever was, but the dark, murky brown of the Tennessee River isn't very encouraging in itself. Most if not all of the water in Chattanooga is pulled from the river, known for its high levels of e.coli and other contaminants, one of the most polluted bodies of water in the South. [*How are bodies polluted? There's more here*]. We have been violent to the earth; it's only natural that she returns the favor.<sup>18</sup>
- II. It sounds like a siren at first, then a scream; I wait at the open door of my car until I'm sure it's the wind. It's too cold outside and the aluminum case of my sedan doesn't offer much warmth. I buy a man a piece of lemon bread, two bananas, a bag of teriyaki beef jerky, and a bottle of gatorade. He sits outside the Speedway in a red beanie, worn jeans, and a thick jacket. He doesn't say much, and his eyes are red, watering from the cold or something else. His right eyebrow is pierced with two safety pins, one silver, one black. I see no scabs or swelling near the wounds and assume them fully healed. I don't ask if he pierced them himself, with the pins.

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<sup>17</sup> 1. An aspect of my outer identity / 2. An aspect of my inner identity / 3. Guidance to live authentically

<sup>18</sup> The planet continues to suffocate: today, the air was more polluted than usual; I could see the layers of dust in the air, and an air quality warning advised to stay indoors if possible. I can't escape the feeling that I'm running out of time. I can't decide if it would be worse to live forever or to die before I've had a chance to live. [But you already said that life is death multiplied—is not death only a continuation? I thought you did not fear death?] [I need to tell you that I have killed before, that I am not impartial or innocent in this series of deaths]

- III. I've never been to Florida, but today I spoke with a man who had, and he told me he plans to move to the Everglades once he retires. He was older [at least 40, though I'm not great with numbers], and talked with the calm demeanor of a man who knew he would soon be able to rest. He said puddle-ponds line the dirt roads and claimed that once, having decided to fish in these ponds, he was chased off by alligators. He said hordes of trucks with flood lights could be seen searching for pythons in exchange for legal bounties from the government [intended to encourage community regulation of invasive species]. I told him I want to move to Vermont when I retire and he asked me if I like motorcycles and I told him I think they're dangerous, but kinda cool, and he agreed. Said they rode to Vermont on their bikes, and it was gorgeous—I haven't been yet, but I will. He seemed like a kind man, blue collar—the first thing he asked me was my name, and he greeted me like he would a new friend. It was easier to look him in the eyes than it is with most others, and it was easy to have respect for him. He was very kind.

—

TRY AGAIN:

*Picture the skull as a dark room, a cell, the brain  
an overworked piece of spearmint gum—somewhere in the room  
rots a half-eaten pomegranate, collecting flies and dust  
and bits of fabric: find it, hold it in your hands, feel the rot drip  
between your fingers, let it spread to the deepest corners  
of that room—*

[I dream of us again and we are rocks,  
nothing, falling into the belly of a monster.]

[Weather and Other Incendiaries]<sup>19</sup>

*[Queen of Pentacles]*

It never rains these days. The sky is gray all night  
without tears. It must be tired, waiting  
for thunder, breathing shallow breaths of thin air  
until the clouds wipe their eyes and leave  
with a tired sigh of wind, exhausted, wanting sleep.

Last time it rained, the roof caved in: it patched up  
well enough, but now your bones ache and your tongue  
is dry, like your lips, 'cause all the pipes  
are flooded with saltwater and your chapstick drifted  
out the window along with your favorite pen.

The cats made it out but haven't come back,  
which is more of an inconvenience than anything 'cause now  
there's a rat living in the gutter and he won't stop singing folk songs  
but you're too lazy to do anything about it, so you get to talking  
and sing along when you know the words. You feed him  
bits of seaweed and every once in a while you share a cigarette,  
but eventually you both get tired of formalities

and he starts to complain about the way you season food  
and tries to leave every time you sing along, so  
you learn to let things go and skin the rat, fry him up in a pan  
with flakes of drywall and sea salt and serve the meal hot  
with a cheap glass of red wine and then the bottle. After you eat  
your friend, you finally forgive God for the pitiful truth  
that everything good is bitter until you drown it in rosemary  
and olive oil. You save the meat scraps in case the cats come home  
and practice the scene of their return:

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<sup>19</sup> Like water, lightning follows the path of least resistance. The positive charge moves from particle to particle, and scientists have discovered that beams of light, concentrated particles, can be used to create a more attractive path for the bolt; this allows them to direct it, to control it, like poking holes in soil with a toothpick to create paths for water to seep through to a deeper layer. [This is too much power—man is trying to be God, has been God, has become death—and what of the nuclear power plant in Oak Ridge, where I once was lost on back roads and to turn back despite the emptiness I saw behind the closed gate?]





[The Hierophant]<sup>21</sup>

Around 8 pm, walking by the Kankus on McCallie, a man stops us, asks for fifty cents. I stall, unsure if I have the change and not wanting to give him reason to approach. You offer a faded \$10 bill from your wallet [the only cash either of us are carrying], which you'd forgotten was there. He tells us with some difficulty, lips slanted and seemingly frozen on one side, that his 50th birthday was a few days ago. A few lines later he says 60, but I let it slide—nothing is permanent, and we can't be expected to remember everything. You talk about your star signs and he asks if you have kids; you laugh and say no and he tells us both we look young. He's got seven kids, had his first at ten years old—he calls his past self 'a wild child' and tells us he thinks he started too soon<sup>22</sup>. You ask where his kids are now and he says they're all over thirty, skirting the question, and we don't pry for more information. He tells you to stay safe and have a good night before offering me the same, and we reply in kind. By the time we leave the bar, he's gone, and I realize I stood an extra five feet behind you the whole time you spoke. I would've been happy to join, but I think he could tell I was nervous; I don't know how to say, *It's not you that scares me, it's everything; I can tell that you're kind, it's not you; I am always afraid.*

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<sup>21</sup> Scanlon, T.M. *What We Owe to Each Other: A Social Contract for a Better Society*. Belknap Press, 2000.

<sup>22</sup> Alfonseca, Klara. "Why Abortion Restrictions Disproportionately Impact People of Color." *ABC News*, ABC News Network, 24 June 2022.

[A Moment of Hope in Winter]<sup>23</sup>

[*The Sun*]

[*in which we may find warmth*]

So it's true—so I want to fall in love again with the world around me. So I want to look at blue sky and people with strollers and dogs on leashes and listen to the sounds of children laughing through open windows. So I want to walk in the park with you, the one near our home that you told me about so many months ago. We need to feel

the sun on our skin, and I will remember to wear a hat so the light doesn't hurt my eyes. It will be windy, and maybe we will walk by the water. I will hold your hand and you will kiss my forehead and we will sit for a while. So maybe we get a dog—it's too late to leash-train the cats, but we both could use the exercise. I'll cut back on my smoking,

and we both need to eat more. I don't know how I spend so much on food and continue to starve each day, but we will learn and do better, and we will care for each other. It will be easy to write when we have both been well looked after, by ourselves and by each other. So I want to go through this life with you, so I love you. So I am excited

for the future, and I hope it is for us. Flowers have started to bloom in Antarctica,<sup>24</sup> and I have to believe that even if everything ends, some beautiful thing will remain.

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<sup>23</sup> Hughes, Ted. "Life is Trying to be Life." *Ted Hughes: Selected Poems 1957-1994*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995, pp. 196.

<sup>24</sup> Singh, Geetika. "Climate Change in Antarctica Has given Rise to Blooming Flowers." *Earth.Org*, 5 Oct. 2023 [You might also like: "Over 90% of Emperor Penguins Will Be Quasi-Extinct By 2100 If Current Antarctica Sea Ice Loss Rates Persist: Study"]

## [The World]

If dreams are liminal spaces, if we believe Vasubandhu that life is only a more lucid dream than sleep, then perhaps this is only another space of liminality, of nonself and nontruth, of nonduality, parts comprised of more parts, all contained in one collective whole, the universe, light—

*[Why do dreams matter?  
Try to bring back love—]*

## [The High Priestess]

*I am happy to be loved / Repeat it like a prayer /  
Count to six until your mind is empty / Picture the  
mind as a dark room / No, a prison / It is full of dust  
/ Sweep the hall, pull the cobwebs from the corners  
of that dark cell / I know it is dark and red / I am  
happy to be loved / Red is not the only color of  
blood / It is blue, like death / I am happy / Love,  
too, is red / Repeat it / I am happy to be loved /  
Count to six again / I am happy / Clear your mind /  
There is only love / [Let her stay] / Imagine you are  
a rock, sitting by the river / Every thought is a fox,  
crossing your path for a moment before running to  
the woods / Remember the cobwebs / Go back to  
that room / I am happy / The cats are sneezing  
again, they are sick from the dust / I am loved /  
Repeat it like a prayer, on your knees / Again / I am  
happy to be loved / Count to six / Try again / Pray,  
on your knees / I am happy because of love / Repeat  
it / I am happy / I am loved / It is not enough / Try  
again / Repeat it, on your knees / I am happy / I am  
loved / I am love / Repeat it / Again—*

[Celtic Cross Spread]<sup>25</sup>[*The Tower*]

- I. It started when I heard the neighbors fighting upstairs, loudly, screaming and calling each other obscene names; it was all I could hear, the floor squeaking as they stormed from room to room, their voices echoing, even when my ears were pressed between the pillow and blankets. I gave up on sleep around 4 a.m., but the next night it happened again, and again the night after: the sky would darken and I'd hear them fighting, and each time I heard a voice, I listened closer: sometimes I couldn't tell who was screaming, or if they were screaming at all; sometimes she cried out; sometimes, I reached for my phone to call for help, but I never did. Days passed and I stayed up later, pressing my ears to walls, air vents, peeking through blinds to make sure they weren't outside, to make sure she wasn't in danger, that I wasn't ignoring her cry for help. I spent my days in silence, holding my breath, tiptoeing so as not to suggest I was listening; I began to fear coming home, knowing I'd spend my hours as I had the days before, listening, trying to distract myself only to catch another hint of a voice or crying out and silence all the noise around me, just to be sure. I could not sleep or breathe in my own home; a week passed like this, then two.
- II. *Car after car circles the townhouse, silver, blue, yellow, green, white, black, each a different size and value, each one dented in different spots. Police drive by over and over, lighting the side of the house blue and red and white but mostly blue—*
- III. I hide in concrete steps, half-digested, when a body / with a half-knit smile and an odd look in her eyes / turns to hand me a bag holding two water bottles, a bar of soap, / two bars of granola, and a Bible verse. The blood, / the body, the cleansing baptism. She belongs / to a ministry and says they are passing out bags / to college students to give to The Homeless. / I accept, smile wide with knit teeth / and a cut down the center of my bottom lip. The body / looks tired. She tries again but they do not listen; / they turn away and drop from view / behind a distant block of concrete. It seems / we have all been swallowed.

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<sup>25</sup> Morín, Tomás Q. "Calle a Calle." *Patient Zero*, Copper Canyon Press, 2017.

- IV. *I hear them fighting again, this time outside—we aren't in our home, but it's like ours; the stairs out back are more pronounced [dark wood instead of cement] and an old shed sits by the carport, gray, neglected, lined in rust and dirt, the size of an outhouse if not smaller. I don't know what it would hold other than tools, but it is there; I see it leaned against the tree and I know it is ours and I recognize it and hold it in my eyes as our shed, but we do not have a shed, nor do we need one—*
- V. I hadn't been sleeping, but you should know I wasn't eating much either, and I'd started going out more. I didn't believe it when you said you heard nothing, convinced you were lying or trying to dismiss my anxieties, but I've learned that the neighboring apartment, where I swore on both of our lives I heard her scream, is empty. So I have been hallucinating, or misinterpreting the sounds around me: outside, the A/C unit drips water, and the box fan clicks and grinds; when our cats jump on the uneven table downstairs it tilts, hitting the wall with a deep thud that echoes through the floor of our bedroom; after it rains, in the quiet, I can hear the radio of each car that passes on the road, echos of hushed, secretive voices; I feel safer knowing the source of these sounds, but still I catch myself pausing in the middle of different tasks when I hear people walking on the sidewalk by the window, or when the TV is loud enough to hear upstairs. I'm in recovery—some nights I sleep well; most days I wake in a panic, feeling as if I'll never really rest again. All of my fear is easier to hold when I put it to writing, but you need to know why I'm so afraid, why I haven't found a way to end this cycle—

*[Make this more real, more grotesque]*

VI. *There are four living bodies outside—  
the fifth is only there for a moment; she seems  
sweet, familiar, but I can't place  
how I know her. I think they kill her,  
or I do—somebody pushes somebody else  
and in the chaos, she falls and splits  
her head on the pavement. There is blood,  
I think; I don't remember; it is dark  
and I am scared so I close the blinds  
and turn off the lights and lock the doors  
three times for good measure—*

VII. In my dream, you were sleeping when they surrounded the house. Then you woke because I woke you, or you heard the noise outside, or the flash of cop lights shocked your body back to life. I looked through the bay window and saw bodies. Eventually, inevitably, the people outside our home got in—I don't know how, I locked the doors, I told you this before I fell asleep—and started to dig through the cabinets, taking our snacks for their own. *We don't have any food*, I told them; *I'm sorry I accused you of eating all the Triscuits*, I told you; *You're lucky I don't call the cops on you*, I tried to warn them, but the officers were already circling and they came while we slept, packed the four bodies into the back of an SUV along with the shed for evidence—I don't know what happened to the fifth body, they must have forgotten her—

*[I'm sorry your friends abandoned you—]*

VIII. And again, I wake, afraid. The night before, as both of us tried and failed to sleep, you told me you were scared something terrible could happen so I told you it would be okay, that I locked both doors and the lights were off and the blinds closed; I promised I'd keep you safe if I needed to. I don't know if you witnessed my nightmare, but each time I woke I could hear your ragged breath, and your body shook under the covers as cold sweat dripped from your forehead onto the cotton pillowcase that cradled your skull.

## [The Hermit]

- IX. What is it, then? So I don't want to go outside anymore, so I am tired of being a man. So the body is tired and her joints are stiff and her foot burns as if hot water spilled down the inside of her leg. So I wake every morning and do the dishes and drink my coffee and sing to the birds that died outside the kitchen window last time it snowed. Every night the body needs to sleep and instead I hear voices, always fighting, never happy. I told you I held my breath and sat at the foot of my bedroom door, listening to nothing; I believed I heard my parents argue, but this didn't happen. So maybe I have tried and failed to invent a history for myself. So maybe I've been trying to invent myself from the moment I understood that I don't want to be a man or a woman, or any combination of the two, and in doing so have rejected the body; so maybe in the process I pulled you down to my height, to look you in the eyes and tell you I don't want this body; I don't want to exist in a body, so the body is only a vessel for love, so the body has failed; so it is not this body, but any body, that I fear—

## [Death]

*If you leave with anything, let it be this: my body  
is irrelevant. When I tell you my name do not imagine  
my face; I don't know what I look like, and I will not  
meet your eyes until we stand on even ground. What you  
refuse to see cannot be remembered, examined, turned  
over in the mind you have been in mine. Please, try to  
understand when I ask you not to look at me—my favorite  
color was blue, but now I only dress in greens and pinks  
and other hues I don't recognize—so I change my hair  
and my favorite color and my clothes and I do not look  
in mirrors or take photos because it would not be true,  
because I am not represented by this body—so I do not  
know whose body it is, but I know it isn't mine,  
the body cannot be trusted—*

X. [Interrogation]

[*The Fool*]

[*After Ted Hughes' "Wodwo"*]

Where are you? Are you afraid of me? All I see is ground, everywhere;  
do you want me to find you? I think it is too dark, I think I am afraid

of the dark; do you know where we are? I remember a story about a rat,  
trapped for weeks underwater, waiting; is it me? Do you know

my name? What is it? If I am the rat, who is water? Are these my hands,  
cold, cold and dead and purple? I don't know them, but they will not leave me;

should I hide? I cannot see, there is only dirt and roots, roots, I think  
the roots are above me and below me I hear water; I am still cold,

cold and afraid and I do not want to move anymore, but I have  
to keep going, there has to be light, somewhere—