The Young Ones Have Such Big Eyes

by

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THE YOUNG ONES HAVE SUCH BIG EYES
By Emily Rose Apter
For Mom and Dad
Hold my hand, Mary. Hold on, Mary. Love you, Mary. Keep going, Mary. Are we going to get there? (Do we want to get there?) But we do get there.

—Graham Swift
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Her name is Carmelita, she told me. Like the film star, Carmelita Gonzalez, eyebrows arched and skin gold like the Golden Age of Mexican cinema. Or like the racehorse. People in Louisville place money on horses with legs like spiders. Shy Carmelita placed first in May, though the 65-year-old woman in front of me was far from shy. Car-meh-lee-tah, my dad repeated. He pronounced her name carefully, savored each consonant like a shard of something sweet. The sound of it on my father’s lips made the distance between 82 Green Street in Hartford where she lived and 82 Beacon Hill Drive in West Hartford where we lived feel like something more than six miles.

“Our house number is also 82,” I told her, as if the connection was meaningful. What I meant was to ask if you can visit a place that isn’t that place anymore. Or a place that isn’t yours to visit at all.

It was September, 2016, the tipping point between summer and fall in New England, and the morning was blue-gray in a way that feels distinct to Connecticut. I was unsure of a lot of things, like why we were there, exactly. Though I was certain that one of the pastel-colored apartments on Green Street had belonged to my great-grandfather, Louis. Papa Lou Lou, as I’d always known him, moved to Hartford from Brody, Austria in 1920 with his brother, Harry (to whom, in writing, Papa Lou Lou referred strictly as MON FRERE), and their mother, Molly. Sam, the boys’ father, had been in Hartford eleven years already when he met his family at New York Harbor. Like many other fathers in the shtetl, he had left Brody before his wife and children to avoid conscription in the Polish army and to set up a new life on the other side of the Atlantic.
On December 9, 1997, Papa Lou Lou poured himself a glass of Wild Turkey with a splash of grapefruit juice. He sat in a reclining leather chair on the porch of his condo in Tamarac, Florida with a bowl of peanuts and an extra sharp Ticonderoga pencil in hand. Earlier that day, he had received an invitation to attend my younger brother’s first birthday party in West Hartford. But cold weather was his enemy, he always said, and, for that reason, he would not attend. Instead, he spent the day writing out the stories of his life, breaking open those first loves, first jobs, second chances, and last resorts and wrapping them in language. He wrenched them from the murk of memory, filled the wide-ruled lines of a composition notebook with the kind of cursive that is no longer taught in classrooms. His handwriting had a rhythm to it, I thought, the first time my dad let me see what felt like a family secret tucked between the Jewish bible and a copy of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* on a shelf in our basement. It seemed to encode something as big and shaking as an earthquake. My dad had been the one to request these stories, and so Papa Lou Lou addressed them to him, wrote his life as one long letter to his oldest grandson. Papa was probably around 88 years old when he started writing, though exactness became irrelevant when he arrived in America. He never considered himself much of a writer, though he always smelled like pencils, I remember.

Printed neatly in that composition book was the address of his first apartment in Hartford, the one where Yiddish turned to English and where his mother, Molly, pickled herring in glass jars. In September 2016, when my dad walked down Green Street for the first time, he carried that same composition book under his arm. I watched him from the car for several moments before joining him. From the passenger’s seat, the street unfolded through the windshield and converged into a point on the horizon that I learned later was a former school. I clutched an empty
notebook between my bare knees and watched my dad walk with a conviction that I
didn't quite recognize. He was gentle with the composition book, making sure, as he
walked, the pages didn't all come tumbling out from its worn-out spine.

We were looking for 84 Green Street, for Papa Lou Lou's former home.
Carmelita was standing on the porch of 82 Green St. while a man in a Hartford
Whalers cap and Red Sox t-shirt painted the steps the color of her chipped fingernail
polish. It was Pepto Bismol pink, the shade of heritage roses in Elizabeth Park in June.
Elizabeth Park, known for its 800 varieties of roses, spans 101 acres of land. When the
financier of the Hartford Railroad died at the turn of the 19th century, he left what was
once his farming estate to the City of Hartford with the sole stipulation that “This land
may be associated with the name Elizabeth, in memory of my beloved wife.” The park
is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, but the border between
Hartford and West Hartford has been moved since it opened to the public in 1897.
And so now 82 acres of what was once the biggest park in Hartford now crosses into
its westernmost suburb.

Elizabeth Park is also where the Hartford-based poet Wallace Stevens wrote
the line, “March / Someone has walked across the snow, someone looking for he
This is the poem from which Susan Howe derived the title of her essay, “Vagrancy in
the Park,” about a hazy northeastern day in 2003 when she traveled to Hartford to see
for herself the rose gardens where Stevens spent his time when not working as vice
president of the insurance company a few miles up the road. Howe found that by
drenching herself in Stevens's Hartford she was also transported to Dublin's Herbert
Park, where she had spent the summer of 1947 with her grandmother. The half-light,
the hornbeams—they delivered her to both places.
“Hartford was Dublin,” she wrote. “Home in the world—away in the world—landscape and language threaded.” Also threaded in that landscape is the financier’s wife. I always liked the way the park name uses Elizabeth as an adjective. The park is not Elizabeth’s to possess. Elizabeth herself gets to describe it.

During my own hazy northeastern summers, a friend and I would drive to the east side of the park in her dad’s pickup truck. Sometimes I would ride in the flatbed, but always we would park in the ring-shaped lot that overlooks the Hartford skyline. In high school, I was never too concerned with the concrete insurance landscape. Though when the night was especially clear, we glimpsed the cobalt dome integral to the otherwise unremarkable contour of the city. Sheet metal catches the light, curves down like an onion—so beautiful it took me years to learn it was the Colt Armory, where firearms have been manufactured in Hartford since the mid 1800s. “Isn’t it funny,” a friend once noted with a smile that suggested “funny” was not exactly what he meant. “Hartford is the Insurance Capital of the World and the home of a historic gun factory.” He paused and smiled just a little bit. “We make protection policies and weapons.”

It wasn’t until Carmelita joined us on the sidewalk that I realized we had been talking to her from over the chain-link fence. She was wearing two pairs of glasses, one around her neck and one on her head. She raised the first pair slowly and then let them fall back toward her chest. I thought I had been the one searching for something that morning in September, though she looked at me then as if trying to locate something for herself. My dad did that thing with his lips that he always does when he’s about to ask a question. Head tilted, mouth fluttering. I don’t remember what he asked, but she told us about her brother.

“His eyes are even paler than yours,” she told me. “Also green.”
“Pale like yours,” she repeated. “So no one believes that we are twins.”

I realized we had the wrong house before my dad did, but by then I had decided not to say anything. He had already told Carmelita that this is where his grandfather first lived when he came to Hartford in 1920. 82 Green Street, not 84. Right here, where she lives now. That was all it took. That was why we approached Carmelita and the man with the pink paint can, because of a mishap of memory, the way numbers and little shards of information get jumbled in the brain. Behind Carmelita, the man in the Whalers cap swayed back and forth to the meter of his brushstrokes. There was a smoothness to the whole scene, something methodical yet electric. Right here, right here, my dad repeated. The air was bursting with something in a way that made me think I understood emptiness better. I’m almost certain Carmelita felt it too.

“You have a sister who lives in Wethersfield,” she told my dad. She seemed to recognize us all of the sudden. She spoke in statements, certainties and not questions.

“I have a sister,” he responded. “But she lives in Dallas.”

“Young sister is a teacher in Wethersfield,” Carmelita repeated, as if the very repetition brought us closer to something inevitable.

The funny thing was, I started to believe her. I knew my aunt had lived in Texas for the last 20 years. But that didn’t seem to matter. Carmelita told us that she had been exhausted all day from a feeling of waiting. She even missed her granddaughter’s mariachi performance to wait for the thing that may have been nothing at all. Just yesterday, her grandson’s fifth-grade teacher had told her that her father used to live here too. And so Carmelita stayed home, tired and waiting, for the knock on her door that would take the place of her granddaughter’s Zapateado and deliver her toward a
certain kind of destiny. We laughed and laughed until tears formed in the eyes that don't resemble her twin brother's.

“Just yesterday. Just yesterday,” she said. “I have been waiting for you.”

Carmelita moved to Hartford from Puerto Rico when she was twelve years old and has lived at 82 Green Street ever since. The neighborhood has changed a lot since the influx of Puerto Rican immigrants after World War II, but Carmelita has put a lot of work into maintaining the original appearance of the house. After her husband died a year and a half ago, she dedicated most of her time to upholding its perfect pink exterior. Her voice was mostly steady as she talked, but the slightest twitch of her lower lip gestured toward a universe of pain she had set aside. There was something unfamiliar about the way she gave words to her house and her husband, though maybe I’m just unaccustomed to people speaking with such certainty. I think it has to do with that conviction I was talking about: little splinters of truth in my father’s delicate squeeze of the composition book or in the way that, in an instant, that teacher from Wethersfield became a part of my family. Carmelita pointed down the street to the apartment building where she got married and then to the parking lot where the North End’s first bilingual school used to stand. The house behind her was my great-grandfather’s rose-colored neighbor, a sanctuary of sorts whose spider-legs propel it in every direction at the same time.

“You are Irish?” Carmelita asked us. My dad laughed.

“No, we are Jewish.”

Carmelita told us that when she was a little girl, the woman who worked in the candy shop down the street sold her Atomic Fireballs by the handful. One by one, Carmelita would unwrap them from their clear packaging, suck the sugary sphere just
enough to coat it in saliva, and then slide it across her lips. She looked past me as she spoke, pursing her lips slightly while remembering 50 years later the singe of cinnamon to the tongue. She smiled at the glossy-mouthed image of her former self and revealed the space where her left bicuspid used to be. She told me that the candy woman wore white lace socks up to her shins, and always with high heels, big and straight-sided like Cuban boots. After work, she would take her two children and their dog, Penny, to Elizabeth Park with a picnic blanket, and feed them leftover gumdrops and bunches of grapes.

“I think she was Jewish,” she added after a pause. The recollection shook her with unexpected force.

“Always with the white socks,” she repeated. “Like Lucy. Ya know, from TV? Everyone was the same to me growing up. That’s just how I was raised. But she may have been Jewish. Those socks! And she fed her children so many grapes.”

My dad wandered down the street for a few minutes, perhaps looking for the actual 84 Green Street, perhaps for nothing in particular. Carmelita asked how my dad and I knew each other.

“He’s my dad,” I told her and, for the second time that morning, tears welled in the eyes that don’t resemble her brother’s. This time she wasn’t laughing. She kissed my shoulder and made the sign of the cross. She called me Emilita, and she called me beautiful, and she redirected her attention to a ten-pound dog behind the chain-link fence. He had been barking steadily throughout our conversation, but I hadn’t noticed. She picked him up and held him tight against her chest.

“This is Toby,” she said. Toby. My dad walked back toward us and gestured toward his car on the other side of the street. Carmelita shifted Toby’s weight onto her left arm to take the scrap of paper I handed her with my name and phone number.
She smiled at me and then back at the dog. I should have asked for her contact information, I thought, though I guess I know exactly where to find her.

“He is special to me,” she said as my dad and I crossed the street. I waved and she yelled out after us, “He was born the day my mother died!”

***

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live.” That’s what Joan Didion says, anyway, in the title essay of The White Album. These are the stories of my life and of other people's lives, the bitterly true, blissfully false, tender, and violent and delicately both. These are the stories of people I love and people I half-created, people I want to love and people who died before I was born. This is the story of Carmelita and the financier’s wife. Of the rose garden, my great-great-grandmothers, and all the names I have ever found beautiful. Certain names I recite over and over again. Sometimes I crack them open into the person they signify, and sometimes I am left with language's eggshell outer walls.

Because that’s what we do, we tell stories. Or that’s what I’m trying to do. Right here, right here. Right now. Tacking on words to make sense of it all, generating meaning and then wearing out that meaning from overuse and from love. But not without roses, stones stacked on other stones, poems by Wallace Stevens, trips to Arizona, and the way certain places look in certain types of light.

This project started out as an exploration of one family’s history in one particular place. I wanted to think about place as both material and imagined, as existing in a single location with a distinct set of geographic properties, saturated in everything that has ever happened there, but also as existing everywhere and nowhere, continuously deferred by time itself. I wanted to think about where time happens,
where and how we point to the past. I wanted Hartford to be that site of examination, where events happen one after another and stratify like sedimentary rock.

What I didn’t realize is that events are events because they are contingent and extraordinary. As French philosopher Alain Badiou notes in his book, *In Praise of Love*, the effect of an event is stronger than its own causes. An event retroactively change the rules of what is possible. It ripples earthquake-like forward and backward so both past and future are recast in its terms. Only when inscribed in language, “The chance nature of the encounter morphs into the assumption of a beginning.” We extract meaning and endurance from the encounter, and then bend it into a process of getting to know the world.

Badiou is talking about the way it feels to fall in love, love as event that rocks and shatters the after and before. But I think what he’s saying applies to the people, things, and historical events that have existed and will continue to exist within these city limits. Hartford is full of beginnings and the assumptions of beginnings, endings and the assumptions of those endings as well. What I’ve learned is that everything exists simultaneously in Hartford. Truth gets constructed all in one heap.

I guess what I’m saying is that inside this heap is where I found the stories. And onto that heap I have added some stories of my own. This project turned into an exploration of the way language both delivers us to and locks out of certain meanings. It’s about the people and the places and the words wrapped around them. We keep making up stories and then telling those stories to death.

When my dad and I walked down Green Street that morning in September, Carmelita became something for us that maybe she wasn’t. And by that I mean, we became that thing for her as well. We were bending each other toward narrative ends, patching up self and story, helping each other feel whole. It was a specific kind of story
that infected us with something hopeful and drenched us in Connecticut’s blue-grey light. She was waiting for someone, and we had the house number wrong. We were looking for my great-grandfather’s home, and she thought my dad’s sister taught fifth grade. It had something to do with being in the wrong place at the right time.

I haven’t given up on the words quite yet. I haven’t given up on the repetition, desperation, and exhaustion of language. And so here’s a sort of failed storytelling, a story of none of and all of the things above. It’s a story where words are not enough but not enough is all we have. Though, now that I think about it, maybe it’s something else entirely.
When I was four months old, my parents moved to West Hartford, Connecticut into a house that was white with red shutters because we hadn't painted it yet. Sometimes they remind me that before we moved, we lived in a concrete apartment building across from a bowling alley in Fairfield. That was when my dad still wore wire-rimmed glasses and just after my mom taught high school sophomores about World War II. That was before any of us had read a poem by Wallace Stevens, or eaten “taste of summer” pancakes no matter the season at our favorite diner in the West End. Eventually, (everything happens eventually) the house turned yellow with green shutters and time began. We came to call it “the yellow with green shutters” house with great affection, especially eight years later when we moved a second time, this time across town. Though we loved that lemony exterior, our new house was white with black shutters and made of a material that my parents said was too expensive to paint. My dad got new glasses (dark-rimmed, trendy) and my mom stopped teaching. The diner was no longer in walking distance, but we had never walked there anyway.

Sometimes people talk about language like it can freeze time or transcend it. Outlive it, push through it, crack into its molten core, or collapse its walls into a free-fall, broken heap. I’m not saying that language doesn’t do these things, but that these metaphors, in their efforts to extend beyond the limits of language, suggest something different about the nature of time. It made me wonder how certain words can acquire meaning outside their definitions depending on when I encounter them. The name of a person gets separated from the person wrapped inside it, a word sundered from its OED entry. Language bends meaning out from the word and into the person encountering it. I guess what I’m saying is that before this summer, I had never read a
poem by Wallace Stevens, but his name echoed with familiarity in a way I didn’t quite understand. And there seems to be a lot of power in something that can lodge time in icy space, crack it open like an egg, or cave it in like a swaying suspension bridge all at the same time.

This vague sense of familiarity might have been what compelled me to pull a copy of *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* off the shelf of a small bookstore on the Upper East Side of Manhattan this summer. I soon learned that Wallace Stevens was born in Reading, Pennsylvania in 1879 and was educated in Boston and New York. He spent the majority of his life in Hartford, CT after he began working as vice president of The Hartford Insurance Company in 1916. He moved into a house on Westerly Terrace several blocks from the house that became yellow with green shutters—though it wouldn’t be built for another six years after Stevens moved to town.

The Hartford is on Asylum Hill, a neighborhood of Hartford that is mostly flat and named after the Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons, which opened next to The Hartford in 1817. Cogswell Avenue runs perpendicular to Asylum and is named after Alice Cogswell, the asylum’s first patient, who, as an infant, was diagnosed with cerebral-spinal meningitis and lost her ability to hear and to speak. Seven years earlier, The Hartford had opened as a fire insurance company, which responded to many natural disasters of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as the Great Chicago Fire and 1906 San Francisco Earthquake. Three years before Stevens took over as vice president, The Hartford formed its Accident and Indemnity Company, which included accident liability and homeowners insurance.

Thanks to the Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens Foundation, the walk that Stevens made to and from work each day is now marked by 13 granite slabs, each the size of a modest headstone and each emblazoned with a stanza of Stevens’s
“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” The walk begins at The Hartford, the cusp of downtown, and proceeds west on Asylum Avenue past the Congregational Church, Hartford Conservatory, Federal Credit Union, Classical Magnet School, and other notable Hartford landmarks. The last stone faces his white clapboard house with green shutters on Westerly Terrace.

It was November 2016, when my dad and I stood outside the insurance building in front of the first inscribed slab of stone. It was a centennial of sorts from when Stevens began working there, and my dad had taken the day off from the same insurance company so together we could walk the 2.4 miles from The Hartford to Stevens’s former home. I held the collection of poems in my hand, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” already flagged from my summer reading. Across the street, the sky-lit dome of the State Capitol jut thumb-like over a line of leafless maple trees. My dad had me read the first stanza out loud.

I.
Among twenty snowy mountains,
    The only moving thing
        Was the eye of the blackbird.

My dad compared the eye of the blackbird to the eye of a cyclone, both points at the center of something with eye-wall thunderstorms (or silky black feathers) rippling out. The eye of the storm is still. Everything around it moves violently outward. The eye of the blackbird is the only source of movement. Everything else is silent, still.

I could read the words carved in granite, and I was familiar with their cadence from my reading that summer, but in that moment I could not separate the meaning from the breath. The “eye” of the blackbird became the “I” of the blackbird, selfhood revealing itself in sonic similarities. The only moving thing is the blackbird’s self. What
surrounds the eye stays the same, but the “I” metamorphoses into infinite iterations of itself.

We made our way to the second stone, which sits on the lawn outside of the Asylum Hill Congregational Church. The soft branches of a willow-like tree hung over the stone as if the tree were planted upside down, or gravity was working in reverse. The Sunday morning service had just ended when we got there. Several families with young children in pea coats and Mary Janes got into their cars, just as I tried to convince my dad that Wallace Stevens is really funny.

II.
I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

His poems are both poems and the idea of poems, I told him. The blackbird is blackbird and the representation of one at the same time. Stevens’s snowy landscapes and half-indecipherable meditations on space and time enact the idea of what readers might expect a poem to be. But beneath those snowy mountains rests a man in a suit with red cheeks and tongue-in-cheek similes. The speaker is not just split three ways about something, but split three ways about something in a way that resembles the existence of three birds perched in a tree. It’s funny, I insisted, though I started to forget what had made me laugh in the first place. It’s like comparing a six-foot person to a six-foot tree. Two different things that are both six feet tall are similar in the most obvious way. The comparison does not deepen the understanding of the six-foot person, but rather calls attention to the act of comparison, to the use of figurative language. I laughed and laughed and my dad laughed too. Though we may have been laughing at different things.
I had been sitting at home over the summer when I read “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” for the first time. I had been slowly chiseling away at the collection of Wallace Stevens's poetry and had finally made it to arguably his most famous poem, first published in Harmonium in 1923. I vaguely recalled a “walk” of sorts commemorating one of Hartford's great writers, and so, naturally, I turned to the internet. The top hit was a link to a New York Times article from 2012 entitled, “For Wallace Stevens, Hartford as Muse.” The author marveled at the unexpectedly rich literary history of the Insurance Capital of the World. He wrote that Stevens had composed his Pulitzer-prize winning verses on that 2.4 mile walk to work. Perhaps Stevens was inspired by the ghosts of neighbors past, for he lived just around the corner from the white-columned house where Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin, as well as the neo-gothic mansion, where Mark Twain penned Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer into existence.

Despite this steady stream of canonical talent coming out of Hartford, the city does not exactly come to mind alongside London or Dublin or New York or Paris. If you’re thinking about Hartford, you’re probably thinking about insurance, or the halfway point between New York and Boston—perhaps a nice enough place to stop for pancakes to break up the drive. The writer of the article is similarly confounded. He asks, “Does Hartford have Sedona-like cosmic rays of genius passing through it? Are there magic pyramids of Parnassus buried beneath its landlocked streets?”

Perhaps the author’s question was just a rhetorical strategy. Only through figurative language could he elicit the magnitude of his astonishment about Hartford's electric literary past. Yet this comparison felt insincere to me, armored with derision. By suggesting similarities between these cities, he seemed to secure their differences.
It’s as if he was not suggesting something magical about Hartford but asking, how could Hartford, Connecticut of all places have anything in common with Sedona?

The word, “sedona-like” in the article was hyperlinked and led me to another New York Times article entitled, “In Search of the Vortex Vibe in Sedona” from 2006. It was a travel piece that was particularly helpful in its recommendation of kitschy diners and hiking trails. But it also deepened my understanding of Hartford, CT as something separate from Sedona but “like” it in some way.

What struck me most was the link between the two articles. “Sedona-like” and not “Sedona” itself was the connection, a compound adjective designed to suggest kinship between the two cities. Regardless of the writer’s intentions (or the New York Times Online database, for that matter), Hartford and Sedona were linkable in some indeterminate, hypertextual way. And though I had never been to the pyramids of Parnassus, I just so happened to have a plane ticket to Phoenix dated for the following week. My dad had planned a ten-day road-trip around Arizona for the family before school started, and our first destination was a two-hour rented minivan-ride up I-17.

One week after that Google search—one week after I cracked open that poem for the first time—I found myself among the sandstone buttes and upscale retirement communities of Sedona, Arizona. I wasn’t looking for anything in particular. But I knew that these two cities were suddenly connected in a way that felt essential to understanding both of them.

III.

The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

It was one of those fall days where the sky matched the color of the concrete sidewalk. The roman numeral clock outside of the Hartford Federal Credit Union informed us that it was almost noon. My dad commented on the “sagging” quality of
this stretch of Asylum Avenue. The Victorian-style homes were in relatively good condition, yet there was still a feeling like this city had “forgotten part of its own past.” I took a picture of a dead squirrel (the first of two we saw that day) jumbled with fallen leaves and uprooted grass. It was only recognizable by the still intact part of a feathery tail, which caught the light in a way that was almost beautiful.

As we continued walking, more and more bits of trash and broken objects littered the sidewalk like the snow that hadn't yet fallen. They flitted and flickered among fallen honeylocust leaves. There were empty packs of Newports and McDonald's soda cups with waxed paper gone soft from rain and syrupy residue. There were Twinkie wrappers, empty Tic Tac containers, broken shot glasses, glimmering bits of tin foil, and one of those tree-shaped car fresheners that swings violently from the rearview mirror on a sharp left turn. A plastic grocery bag across the street clung to the bare branch of a red maple like one last stubborn leaf.

I was reminded of a speech by Eileen Myles called “How to Write an Avant-Garde Poem,” in which she describes fallen leaves that “jounce in the wind, causing the experience of the day to flicker, thus in the twentieth century, we got film, the art experience that most approximates movement.” For Myles, there is something about the technology of the present that precludes bygone concepts like “nature.” The leaves are not leaves but simulations of leaves, flashing like cinema—*whirled in the autumn winds*—under one molten eyeball of a sun. She writes, in the past, nature was “a big, beautiful, dangerous thing.” In the 20th century, however, nature is not real but simulated, and we cannot experience its awesome physicality. We cannot have it, hold it, only glimpse it in technology’s—or in poetry’s—invisible form. The present is about capturing reality, replicating what is physical, sensory, literal—the thing itself—with words and images. Though that *glimpsing of* might be the thing that Stevens was trying
to prolong. Leaves flash like cinema, says Myles. But 24 frames per second only approximates vision.

The fourth stanza was at the corner of Woodland Street next to a pile of dog shit. This stone had fallen over and been left long enough to create an imprint of itself in the grass like a 12 o’clock shadow.

IV.
A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

Next to it was the styrofoam corner of a take-out container and an empty bottle of Jamaican gin. “A man and a woman are one. A man and a woman are one,” I said. A man and a woman and a blackbird are one, and maybe Hartford and Sedona are one too. As we continued walking to the next stone, I picked up a ripped piece of a child’s drawing—what appeared to be the bottom half of a giant bird drawn in wide waxy strokes. My dad and I talked about the blackbird’s inner essence as something that both links us to nature and separates us from it because of our capacity for memory, language. We are the blackbird whirléd by autumn winds, we decided. We are plastic grocery bags, discarded bank statements, and half-eaten Twinkies. We are all these things, including the words that we attach to them. We stepped over another dead squirrel.

There is a short story by David Foster Wallace called “Forever Overhead” set on the western edge of Tucson, Arizona. The saw-toothed tips of the Santa Catalinas hang over the public swimming pool where the story takes place, creating what Foster Wallace describes as an “EKG of the dying day.” The story is about a boy on his thirteenth birthday. It is his birthday all day, though the story itself is fifteen and a half pages of the moment before he jumps off the high dive for the first time. He makes his
way to the top of the board, to the top of the whole sun-baked, concrete scene. Only
once he’s overhead can he “see the whole thing.” He’s like the bumblebee suspended
over his sunbathing mother. She sits on a white plastic deck chair below him and, from
an aluminum soda can, sips something sweet.

V.
I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendos,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

Up until this point, I had been reading the verses aloud, but this next one I
read on my own. I wanted to see if my dad would let me proceed in silence or insist
that I continue with our pattern. Perhaps he too was lost in thought, for what he said
was “the sound or the resonance of sound,” and I pulled out my notebook for the first
time that day. I leaned against the stone and scribbled down his words. He took a
picture of me writing with a graffitied St. Francis Medical Care Center sign in the
background. This is the hospital where Wallace Stevens died of stomach cancer in
1955 and where my dad was born six years later.

Wallace Stevens’s words draw a distinction between what is uttered—not what
is uttered but the utterance itself, modulating sound waves, a thought made audible—
and what is implied. His split mind suggests that inflection and innuendo are both
beautiful, but their beauty is not simultaneous. From the second stanza, however, we
know that his mind is not just split two ways. It is pulled in three (more than three?)
directions at one time. This choice he is making is a false one, and designed this way to
call attention to the dialectic. By securing their differences—how can this thing have
anything in common with this thing?—he gestures toward a beauty that is not one or
the other.
This idea brought to mind another one of Stevens's poems, “So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch,” written in 1947. In the poem, he describes the position of an unnamed woman (“So-And-So”), posing for an artist, in terms of algebraic variables.

The suspension, as in solid space,
The suspending hand withdrawn, would be
An invisible gesture. Let this be called

Projection B. To get at the thing
Without gestures is to get at it as
Idea. She floats in the contention, the flux

Between the thing as idea and
The idea as thing. She is half who made her.
This is the final Projection C.

The “thing as idea and / the idea as thing.” The woman in the poem is suspended in space, like a bumblebee floating and kept still by the soda-can sweetness below. Paintbrush touches canvas and she changes from A to B to C. She both makes and is made by invisible movements. She is half herself and half who made her, both the person and the brushstrokes wrapped around.

After Harmonium came out in 1923, Stevens didn't publish anything for another seven years. During this time (while he was raising his newborn daughter, Holly, and while he was working as vice president of The Hartford), Stevens found himself at the heart of the modern art movement that had formed in Paris in the years leading up to World War I. In 1928, the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford was converted to a modern art museum as related art movements such as cubism, dadaism, and surrealism made their way across the Atlantic and into the American consciousness. In 1931, the Wadsworth exhibited Dali's “The Persistence of Memory,” and then in 1934, it held the first ever Picasso retrospective in the United States.
In October 2016, I attended a “birthday bash” for Wallace Stevens hosted by the Friends and Enemies at the Hartford Public Library. October 2, 2016 would have been his 137th birthday, and so I ate cake with vanilla icing while a slideshow of the poet as a young man was projected on repeat and a woman played the harp. I drank expensive champagne out of a clear plastic cup with 50 or so elderly academics. It was the only open bar at a library I have ever seen.

The main event was a lecture given by Glen McLeod, a professor of poetry and American literature at the University of Connecticut. He talked about the relationship between Stevens and artists like Pablo Picasso (one of two artists whose name actually appears in one of Stevens’s poems). According to McLeod, Picasso’s art fractures three-dimensional objects in two-dimensional spaces. It juxtaposes their pieces, collapses multiple perspectives with body parts and paint. Stevens was confronted with a similar dilemma of expression. He began writing poetry about poetry, poems that shattered objects and created not linear narratives but juxtapositions in space. “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” for example (likely inspired by “The Old Guitarist,” painted during Picasso’s Blue Period), consists of 33 cantos, which serve as 33 variations on the same theme. “Things as they are have been destroyed,” he writes. “Have I? Am I a man that is dead / Is my thought a memory, not alive?”

VI.
Icicles filled the long window
   With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
   Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
   Traced in the shadow
   An indecipherable cause.

In Sedona, mountains shine burnt red, close enough to touch yet miles away.

With jaws dropped and gazes fixed upwards, tourists in rented minivans drive
dangerously, zig-zag over medians. Their eyes are not on the road. They swerve around each other in patterns that perhaps look beautiful to the birds overhead. Beautiful until the weight of a thirteen-year-old boy hits water like concrete, though the water, of course, is soft once he's inside it.

In 2003 USA Today named Sedona “The most beautiful place in America.” That's what my dad told me while we were boarding the plane to Phoenix in mid August. Sedona is situated among the ponderosa pine of the Coconino National Forest in the desert region of the Verde Valley. It was “founded” in 1876 when American settlers journeyed west. They ate the peaches that grew plump in canyon heat and forcefully eliminated the Yavapai and Apache people from the land when gold was discovered in Prescott 70 miles south. By the turn of the 20th century, a Missouri native had established a post office and started calling the place—then inhabited by a hundred or so families—Sedona, the name of his wife. Since then, a constant flow of writers, tourists, and Hollywood filmmakers have been drawn to the city's mythology-infused history, red-rock radiance, and vortex points. A city that shines red in the evenings and is named for the postmaster's wife.

VII.
O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you?

The seventh stone is in front of the Hartford Classical Magnet School next to a Mega Education Stay in School sign at the bottom of Asylum Hill. I read aloud the first seven stanzas. My dad pursed his lips and nodded his head slightly, looking just past me while formulating his next thought. Is a blackbird a black bird, he wondered. A kind of bird or a bird that is black. Are there thirteen ways of looking at a bluebird? An
eagle? A crow? The blackbird's symbolism is in its lack of symbolism. The blackbird is not remarkable. The blackbird is pedestrian. Yet the blackbird flies.

VIII.
I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

These mysterious “vortexes”—not to be confused with “vortices” I was informed by a colorful pamphlet in the lobby of Sedona’s Sky Lodge Hotel—are integral to the city’s tourist industry as well as to its peculiar beauty. LoveSedona.com describes the vortexes as “swirling centers of subtle energy coming out from the surface of the earth.” Arizona’s junipers respond to the vortexes in a way that points to the spots where the energy is strongest. Instead of growing straight up, the juniper branches twist around each other like strands of DNA. According to the same website, the New Age community has been drawn to the spiritual properties of the vortexes and has earned the city the nickname, “Spiritual Disneyland.”

“It only works if you can shut off your mind,” said an elderly park ranger that my family met while hiking in Red Rock Crossing. We had stopped for peanut butter sandwiches on top of one of these sacred vortex points without realizing it. He was half-hidden by an Arizona Ash, and his smile revealed teeth the color of pine needles. Shutting off his mind, he told us, was something he has never been able to do.

I couldn't shed that question, Does Hartford have Sedona-like cosmic rays? What was that lucid inescapable rhythm that had become involved in what I know? It felt like more than the happy-accident hypertextual reality of the New York Times online archive, or even the serendipity of a plane ticket to Phoenix. It was something about the language of time collapsing and the hyperlink that launched a certain kind
of travel. It was the way it looked to see people I love inserted before an extraordinary
backdrop. Half of that extraordinary—that ruby-red geography, junipers coiled around
space—I arrived at. The other half I brought. Though, if I’ve learned anything from the
blackbird, it’s that I shouldn’t divide things so evenly.

IX.
When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

The “edge / of one of” the “many circles” brought to mind the image of a
reverse storm that my dad and I had discussed after reading the first stanza. The
blackbird flies away, yet this rippling effect, this concentric structure conjures
something planetary about the blackbird’s flight. Perhaps these boundaries are also
permeable membranes. Reading a poem by Wallace Stevens is like pressing my hands
against the person next to me as if to confirm the existence of edges. A process of
getting to know where my body ends and the world begins

In his essay, “Stevens, Deleuze, and the Difference They Make” in Wallace
Stevens Among Others, David R. Jarraway writes of Stevens’s notion of the “diva-dame,”
a stand-in for the idea of unfixed identity and “infinite self-predication.” The diva-

The romance of the precise is not the elision
Of the tired romance of imprecision.
It is the ever-never-changing same,
An appearance of Again, the diva-dame.

Stevens remained obsessed with these ideas and objects of imprecision—
fluttering blackbirds, tired relationships—which contain the infinite permutations of
identity. Jarraway quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay, “Experience,” written precisely
100 years before “Adult Epigram.” Emerson writes, “Of what use is genius if the organ
is too convex or too concave and cannot find a focal distance within the actual horizon of human life?”

The blackbird exists as thirteen, if not infinite, variations of itself, flying free as a unified Cubist composite. The blackbird flies forever overhead somewhere within the actual horizon of human life, but also maybe somewhere just above it. It is both self and the rippling trail of representation. The inflection point on a curve is the point between concave and convex. The blackbird flies, and time collapses into a point of inflection and innuendo. Curves drawn on graphs on the whiteboards of classrooms bend to both capture and shatter the light.

X.
At the sight of blackbirds
Flying in a green light,
Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.

There is only one synagogue in Sedona, Arizona, and my dad suggested we go there for a Friday evening service. We stumbled in with dirty sneakers and t-shirts stale and sweat-stained from our day in the sun. The rabbi was a woman from White Plains in a white lace dress. She welcomed us, and we joined the congregation, the only visitors from out of town.

The back wall of the sanctuary was made entirely of glass, and the rabbi pointed to her house just visible through the shrubbery. She could see her home from her spot in the sanctuary, she told us, just like she could see her New York home through the window of the synagogue she belonged to as a little girl. She chanted the Hebrew prayer, Ma Tovu, as the congregation stared through the glass wall behind her into the sunset that turned our prayer book pages red. Maybe the vortexes don’t actually exist, I said to my dad while hiking to a second vortex the next morning.
Maybe people are just feeling what it feels like to be away from home and surrounded by something totally unfamiliar—yet still familiar somehow—and beautiful.

Once we turned onto Terry Street, we entered the distinctly residential part of the West End of Hartford. We read the tenth stone while a man in a red Polartec sweater was mowing his front lawn. In Arizona, sunsets are hard and warm and break smoothly into cold desert nights.

XI.
He rode over Connecticut
   In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
   In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
   For blackbirds.

My dad and I spent the next stretch of the walk talking about the 11th stanza. The stone was planted in a patch of dark-green ivy on the corner of Terry Street and Westerly Terrace. We alternated explaining to each other the different images that Stevens had conjured in our minds. I imagined some fictional version of the poet riding over Connecticut in a flying glass chariot. Blackbirds mid-flight swarmed his vehicle from every side, blocking the sunlight from passing directly through. My dad imagined him rolling over the Connecticut landscape in a carriage that cast no shadow. Light passed through, bending only around the poet at the reins. Stevens sat in a three-piece pinstripe suit, suitable for an insurance executive with a white clapboard house. Someone was blasting rap music from inside a black car across the street. Blackbirds soared overhead.

XII.
The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying.
The twelfth stanza taunted us with its suggestiveness, flaunted an understanding of something just beyond our outreached hands. There was an inference being made—*the blackbird must be flying*—an implied “therefore” that bridged clauses whose causality we could sense but not articulate. We were close to meaning, is how it felt, but never close enough to touch. Wallace Stevens winks at us with lines like this one. He was beckoning us onward, inviting us to take the final leap of literary logic, of faith. By the time I realized what was happening, we were already running toward it. Toward the final stanza, the final blackbird, that final goddamn slab of stone. .25 miles of sidewalk to go. We wanted to get there faster. We were trying to get home.

XIII.
It was evening all afternoon.
   It was snowing
   And it was going to snow.
   The blackbird sat
   In the cedar-limbs.

We read the 13th stone with Stevens’s house behind us. The blackbird is dying, said my dad. It is the evening of his life all day until it dies. But when it’s evening all day, the sun never really sets.

My dad and I imagined a timeline of sorts that might be useful in a high school grammar lesson. A point on the line represents the moment it starts snowing. Everything that precedes it is the prolonged anticipation of the snow. We gestured wildly, mapping out our ever-never-changing timeline on an invisible whiteboard on Westerly Terrace. It is going to snow, and it is already snowing. We are waiting for snow with snow on our cheeks. On one side of this inflection, the world is a morning in winter, one of those sugar-coated mornings with a thin yet ever-growing layer of white. We broke the timeline at the point of inflection and stacked the pieces like
raspberry pancakes. No time passes at the top of a diving board. The sound and the resonance of sound sound beautiful together, as if played from tinny radio speakers inside a snack bar at a swimming pool in Arizona.

A small piece of the 13th stone had cracked off and fallen onto the grass next to it. I slid it back into its place. Before we left, my dad removed the broken piece and placed it on top of the slab, instantly rendering it a gravestone. “It’s a metaphor” he said. We smiled at each other and steered head-on into language’s murk.

We made our way back toward The Hartford as my dad did the next morning and the morning after that, and as Wallace Stevens did every day that he was living in Hartford until he died. I asked my dad if he remembered the Friday evening service in Arizona, the one where the sun set spectacular behind the glass wall, distracting the congregation from their prayers with its beauty. The rabbi talked about Shabbats—the one we were experiencing together and ones from the past. “Carry them with you,” she said. “Let memories of Friday evenings past become part of tonight.” The sun sent red shards of light off of the mountains behind the glass behind the altar. “Layers of loveliness” is what she called them.

My dad told me that he thinks there is a sixth sense that exists outside of time. It’s not that there is no time, but that time is suspended. I imagine this as a droplet of something—like a boy hovering over a swimming pool or the last sweet sip of a sugary drink. My dad imagines it as the blackbird on the eve of its death—not the eve of its death exactly, he clarified. More like the eve of self-awareness. It’s as if one day the blackbird will come to realize its own mortality, and Stevens’s last stanza is the night before that shattering revelation. Or like Shabbat, he told me, which also exists outside of time. Erich Fromm, the Jewish psychoanalyst, said the reason we aren’t supposed to drive on Shabbat or switch on our desk lamps isn’t because it is “work” in the modern
sense. He calls Shabbat “anticipation of the Messianic time,” anticipation being the moment before time starts up again. It’s almost but not quite knowing something shattering, tasting something sweet.

“So which is the lie?” Foster Wallace asks. “Hard or soft? Silence or time? The lie is that it’s one or the other. A still floating bee is moving faster than it can think. From overhead the sweetness drives it crazy.”

There seems to be something that Wallace Stevens was writing about—and Ralph Waldo Emerson, David Foster Wallace, and Eileen Myles—that makes math teachers smile and that grammar teachers draw on whiteboards. Something that resonates in EKG mountainscapes and in modulating waves of sound. It has to do with the way it feels to jump off a diving board—not the feeling of water but just before that, just after the blackbird whistles when everything still exists at the same time. It’s something about engraved slabs of granite, red-rock outcrops, and the way an Arizona sunset would look reflected off of an insurance building in Hartford. It’s the way inflection and innuendo become beautiful together when it is both snowing and not snowing in mid November, and we are retracing the steps between an office and a home.

Instead of walking all the way back to The Hartford, we veered off Wallace Stevens’s path for a pancake lunch. Time stacks like layers of butter and syrup in the diner we always go to—the tallest stack of pancakes the world has ever seen. We never walked there from the yellow house with green shutters, but we walked there for the first time that day from Wallace’s Steven’s former home. “Isn’t this but another layer of loveliness?” asked my dad.
IN THE CEMETERY WHERE MY GREAT-GREAT-GRANDPARENTS ARE BURIED AND WHERE I HAD NEVER BEEN

My mother cried when our yellow labradoodle, Libby, died my senior year of high school. Neither of us cry very often (the externalization of emotion is an inherited trait, I’ve decided), but when I returned home from school that afternoon, we pressed our faces to the dog’s heaving body, hands steadied by the living room couch. The tears were constant. A liquid sadness over the loss of my childhood pet. But there was another kind of sadness as well. This sadness manifested deep within my stomach and as pressure behind the eyes. It gave me that salty chemical jolt of witnessing a person I love, so ordinarily stoic, feel something so fully.

She cried again when she told me about Lisa Vaeth for the first time. Lisa Vaeth is the Director of the Association of Jewish Cemeteries, a beneficiary agency of the Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford. She is not Jewish, but for the past 15 years, she has overseen nearly 30 abandoned cemeteries in Hartford that are unaffiliated with synagogues in the area.

Lisa had told my mom the story of locating the grave of an eight-month-year-old baby girl for an elderly mother living in Arizona. The mother had fled Hartford after her daughter’s death, gazed fixed on the American Southwest, and never looked back. Until one day, 50 years later, when she did. Lisa found the little girl’s grave in the Jewish War Veteran’s Cemetery in Hartford and sent the old woman a photograph.

She spends most of her time managing burial processes (though, at this point, there are only about 20 per year), and helping people locate the lost graves of ancestors. She leads families from out of town through the labyrinthine plots of land, directing them toward their ancestors’ graves and away from sinkholes in the earth. On Mondays, she surveys the cemeteries row by row, searching for discarded
mattresses, dirty diapers, computer monitors, television sets, roofing shingles, tires, and toilets—objects that brim with the halted momentum of their past uses and that get deposited between the rows of gravestones.

“One time someone stole an ATM machine and threw it in the cemetery,” she told me when we sat down together over the summer at the Federation office in West Hartford. “And recently we had a King Solomon statue with the feet broken off. It was from vodou worshippers using King Solomon oil.” Lisa is not unfamiliar with vodou rituals. There is a large Western Caribbean population in Hartford living near the cemeteries in the neighborhoods where Jews from Eastern Europe settled at the turn of the 20th century. With the gloves she keeps in the trunk of her car (along with a shovel, rope, mace, and a Ziploc bag full of pebbles), she picks up the chicken carcasses, goat heads, or cow tongues that get left on top of graves. These animal sacrifices often spook the few visitors that these cemeteries still receive (mostly elderly Jewish women), so she makes sure to remove them before a funeral takes place.

“I just find it so moving,” my mom told me. She was trying to recount the details of the story about the eight-month-year-old girl but forgot just about everything other than the simple fact that she was moved. Unaccustomed to her outbursts of emotion, I stifled uneasy laughter from across the dining room table.

“Mom, are you crying?” I asked, and I knew I had to meet this graveyard lady.

***

Papa Lou Lou didn’t have a birth certificate. He was probably born in 1909, though when he applied for social security after he turned 70, the year was changed to 1908. The only thing he knew for certain was that he was born on the Jewish holiday, Purim, which tells the story of Esther, the Jewish queen of Persia, who saved the Jews from King Haman's plan for extermination during the First Persian Empire. To
celebrate the holiday, Jewish children often dress up in costumes and eat triangle-shaped cookies with fruit fillings that resemble Hamen’s notorious three-cornered hat. Though the date changes every year, the holiday usually falls somewhere in the middle of March, so March 15th became Papa Lou Lou’s birthday. I guess it doesn’t matter if he was born in 1908 or 1909 because he believed his life didn’t start until he was eleven years old, anyway, when he left Brody for Hartford, CT.

In the old country, they didn’t have valises or traveling bags. What they had were some heirlooms and other nice things that had accumulated over the years without them realizing it. Before taking a train from Brody to Warsaw to Danzig in 1920, Molly, Papa Lou Lou, and MON FRERE, stitched empty sugar sacks around the objects that felt important enough not to leave behind, creating one quilted cloth ball. At Danzig, however, their sacks were confiscated along with the hair off their heads. They were stripped naked and sterilized and lined up like desk lamps with bulbs, hot to the touch, and no shades. They made it to a cousin’s walkup apartment in Paris where they ate chocolate bars for lunch and traveled to Le Havre on the coast of Normandy. They boarded the Latouraine and spent ten days on the ship before reuniting with Sam at New York Harbor.

The mass exodus of Eastern European Jews to the United States can be traced to March 13, 1881, when Russian revolutionaries bombed St. Petersburg, killing Czar Alexander II. When Jews were blamed for the murder, a series of government-sponsored pogroms in the 1880s devastated hundreds of shtetls throughout Russia and Poland. This systematic persecution launched several waves of migration to the United States from Czarist Russia, Poland, Romania, Lithuania, and elsewhere. Between 1900 and 1914, 1.5 million Jews, including Samuel Apter, arrived in the United States from Eastern Europe.
Lisa explained to me that the first thing that many Jewish immigrant populations did, once arriving in Hartford, was set up cemeteries. Out of a deep respect for life, they set aside spaces for the dead. This meant buying narrow and cheap tracts of land and collecting $25.00 or $50.00 from the families of the people who died. But with no plan for long term maintenance and only future children and grandchildren to rely on, by the 1970s, most of the plots had gone un-mowed, vandalized, or abandoned altogether. In the 1990s, The Jewish Federation stepped in to manage funds and provide lawn services, masonry repairs, and burial processes.

The sun had not fully risen over Hartford when Lisa arrived at my house in September, 2016. The light leaked pale on the horizon, and autumn hung in the cool air. Lisa was taking me on a tour of Hartford’s Jewish cemeteries. She and my mom work together, so my mom came downstairs to greet her, and my dad, who she had never met, also came downstairs to say hello. I came down several minutes later wearing a red dress, which my mom said looked nice but in a way that suggested she was surprised I had chosen to dress up in the first place. Lisa was petting my German shepherd (she’s a major dog person, she told us) while I told my mom that I didn’t know what the appropriate attire was for visiting a cemetery—not just a cemetery but a whole bunch of cemeteries all in one day. I had decided on red, a red dress that flowed like a sheet and brushed my knees. It felt meaningful in a way that I didn’t quite understand that the four of us—me, Mom, Dad, Lisa, (five if you count my dog)—were standing together in the kitchen on that morning in September. A group of people who had never before shared a room.

I got in the front seat of her grey RAV4 with an Airedale terrier bumper sticker on the back. She had put it there in honor of her dog, Riley, who had died a few
months earlier. I rolled down the window and clenched my notebook between my feet. We were embarking on a three-hour road trip of sorts, from my house in West Hartford to the capital city six miles east. The last road trip I had taken was with my family in Arizona just several weeks earlier. It lasted ten days and delivered a constant stream of unfamiliar images, shifting Southwestern landscapes, red and purple in fast-motion—places like Red Rock State Park and Monument Valley and Canyon de Chelly seen through the backseat window of a rented minivan.

“We’ll start in the North End and work our way up toward Zion,” Lisa told me. “And, of course, hit up a few stops along the way.”

The Zion she referred to was not the one where Jews, Muslims, and Christians make pilgrimage. Nor was it the Zion of the American Southwest, where people make a different kind of pilgrimage to hike up National-Park-protected Navajo sandstone. The places where Lisa and I were going were the Jewish cemeteries of Hartford, formerly abandoned ones. Zion Hill, Bes Israel, Capital City Lodge, Hartford City Lodge, and All Jews Cemetery were just several of the 28 that Lisa is paid to oversee. These gravesites are situated among low-income housing projects and Spanish food stores with neon awnings. Papa Lou Lou’s parents, Molly and Sam, my great-great-grandparents, were buried in one, and I had never been.

Being driven around in such a manner reminded me of Chinle, Arizona, a town of 4,500 tucked in the northeastern corner of the state, where a Navajo man named T.J. Hunter had driven my sister, mom, and me in a red Jeep through Canyon de Chelly within the Navajo Nation. T.J. wore a grey sweat-stained t-shirt with a band logo on the front. He navigated the sandstone spires of Spider Rock with ease, resting within the hardened Jeep tracks of tours past. He steered us past herds of wild horses and around pits of quicksand, pointing out ancient pictoglyphs and cliff-dwellings
carved in the canyon walls where ancestral Puebloan and Hopi people lived until the 14th century. He told us about the summers he had spent in the canyon as a child tending his grandparents’ peach orchard. One night, he was woken by a strange sound echoing off the sandstone walls. He rallied his brothers and sisters and cousins and chased down what they thought was a wild dog but turned out to be a metamorphosing creature after their sweet peaches. On the verge of tears, T.J shot the shape-shifter with a BB gun and woke up his grandmother.

Several years ago, T.J. and his wife were caught in a flash flood and had to hike up the South Rim trail with their newborn daughter tied to T.J.’s chest with the torn sleeve of his t-shirt. At this time, their daughter Nizhoni, whose name means beautiful in Navajo, was still suspended between the realm of the people and the realm of the gods. T.J. explained to us that in Navajo tradition, the gods do not fully relinquish newborn babies until they have externalized joy—until they have experienced the transcendental and deeply human thing that we call laughter. Nizhoni was like Papa Lou Lou in that way, I remember thinking. His life didn’t begin with laughter, but it didn’t begin with birth either. The myth is a beautiful one, I thought, though I remained silent in the backseat of the car.

As Lisa drove me around Hartford, I told her about my writing project and she told me about growing up in a housing project in New Britain in the 1960s. There was no yard or green space for her and her brother to play in, so after school their mother would take them to the cemetery across the street for fresh air. When they arrived at the gate, she gave them a look that Lisa and her brother knew to mean no running, no screaming, no walking on graves. They played in between gravestones and laughed and laughed but were always respectful.
I spent a lot of time in cemeteries when I was in high school. With my friend with the pickup truck, I hopped the fence behind Fern Park, a short walk from the yellow house with green shutters where I no longer lived. We spent the day there asking each other questions that we didn't yet have the language to answer. Wouldn't it save space to bury caskets vertically? Isn't funny how she couldn't cry when her grandfather died, even though her last name is Teare? Are we in love with each other or is this just what it feels like when time is beginning? Where is the past located, and what happens to age when a young person dies?

I was always jealous of this friend for the way she would become debilitated by her fear of death. How fully she felt the preciousness of her own body, dread and imminence ringing in her fingertips. Sometimes while driving alone at night, she would pull over to the side of the road and press her cheek flat to the earth. Only the tap tap of her own heart, her flesh against something hard and still, could separate her end and the world's beginning. She told me stories like this and I longed to feel my own body as something breakable and cold.

“It’s kind of beautiful,” I said to her. She assured me it was mostly terrifying.

My dad followed behind Lisa and me for the first leg of our journey, so he too could see the graves of his great-grandparents. I watched his red car through my sideview mirror until he caught up to us and parked next to a Private No Trespassing sign nailed to the chain-link perimeter of the Bes Israel Cemetery in the North End. I led my dad through an arched metal doorway with Hebrew letters and padlocks until we stood before the graves of Molly and Sam. Lisa commented on the “great condition” of the stones considering they were more than 70 years old. She touched the stone casually like a construction worker confirming the stability of a newly-built
foundation. By great condition, I think she meant that they were untouched by the harsh effects of time.

“The granite comes from New Hampshire,” she explained. “Whoever picked out the tombstones did a good job choosing granite.” Marble is porous and doesn't last as long and brownstone engravings are more susceptible to erosion. She told us to be careful not to twist an ankle because none of the people here were buried with concrete vaults. Soil softens, gravestones destabilize, the earth shifts. Sometimes when it rains too hard, the caskets rise from their positions deep beneath the earth and break through the soil's surface. Lisa has received several frantic phone calls from cemetery visitors, local residents, and police officers, who, after a rainstorm, see a casket protruding straight up toward the sky.

“It's pretty horrifying,” she said, resting her hand on the stone closest to her. “This could really kill someone if it fell over.” I don't think my dad was listening. He was running his fingers along the grooves of Hebrew letters carved into Sam and Molly's gravestones. I think I smiled at the twisted irony of it all. But I also remember wanting to cry.

Once I brought myself to tears because I had never read Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. I imagined myself dying right then—or the next day, or in sixty years—having never gotten around to reading it. It's not that *Beloved* was the book that I wanted to read most. It wasn't. In fact, it was precisely a book that I didn't want to read most. It fell somewhere in the middle of a long list of books I intended to read someday and always assumed I would get to. I guess I had never thought about the possibility of not reading them because I had never thought about death as something that would cut me off from consuming everything and anything I wanted. The thought came over me like freezing lake water in the way it took my breath and made my fingers go numb.
Eventually, I did get around to reading it, but by then it was too late. By then, not reading *Beloved* was not the problem anymore. Reading it remedied only a small symptom of something much much bigger that had opened up inside of me.

That was when I was 16 or 17 years old, and it was the closest I ever got to lying face down in the street at night. But I also remember being five or six years old and sitting on the carpeted floor of my bedroom with my cousin, Caroline, whose birthday is five weeks before mine and who was visiting from Dallas. I was showing her a bisque doll I had gotten as a gift. I didn't like dolls much when I was younger, but I remember particularly liking the way this doll's face felt cold and breakable against mine and the echo-y sound of my fingernails grazing porcelain. My cousin and I were probably doing that thing that little kids do when they imitate the structure of adult conversations. We alternated speaking but said unrelated things. One of the things that my cousin said only now bends toward meaning. She asked me if I would cry if Papa Lou Lou died.

Looking back, she clearly meant to ask if I would cry *when* he died, but we didn't yet understand the world in terms of inevitabilities. The nature of her question was only partly to gauge my emotional connection with our great-grandfather. The other part was to pose a hypothetical question; *if this happens, what would you do?* Either way, I remember shrugging as I pulled at the lacy trim of my doll's dress. No, I don't think so, I responded. Her question felt easy, unremarkable. What did tears have to do with it anyway?

My dad opened the composition book he had been holding under his arm. He flipped to a passage about Papa's Lou Lou's arrival in Hartford and read aloud while Lisa leaned against a gravestone, and I sat crossed-legged on the damp grass.
Sam had left Brody just six months after Papa Lou Lou’s birth, and so, while disembarking the ship, Papa watched his mother and father interact for the first time in eleven years. They did not hug or kiss or display any kind of affection. They took a horse-drawn wagon, and not a cab, from New York to Hartford. Sam wanted his family to see the city as slowly as possible, and perhaps this was how he loved—by letting Manhattan in 1920 linger in the lives of the wife and kids he hadn't seen in eleven years. “You know, Ron,” Papa wrote, “in the old country, years ago, there were no love matches.”

Once in Hartford, the four of them—Papa Lou Lou, MON FRERE, Molly, and Sam—shared a room with a fourth cousin on Walnut Street until they found an apartment of their own on the 3rd floor of 84 Green Street. Papa described it as “four cold rooms and lots of cockroaches.” His father had just enough money for a dining room set, two bedrooms, some kitchen utensils, and a coal stove. After that, he borrowed $200.00 from a relative, which he assured my dad was a lot of money back then and “kept the wolf away from the door.” Every week the four or five 3rd and 4th cousins they had in Hartford alternated cooking dinner—hard-boiled eggs and pickled herring or maybe whitefish and crumbling ginger cookies. Sam smoked Heilman’s Cigarettes out of a hard wooden box. He had bought a share of the United Bottling Company, which brought in $40.00 a week not counting the money he lost on pinochle. Sam wasn’t much of a businessman, so Molly took over the family finances while her husband mixed seltzer and sweet syrup in glass bottles and made home deliveries with a horse and wagon.

Papa Lou Lou and his family moved several times around Hartford throughout the 1920s. The last move they made, just after buying the Charter Oak Bottling Company, was to Love Lane—how romantic! Papa lived in this house for the last few
years of high school, saving up money by delivering meat by bicycle and working in the shoe department of Watchels Department Store, which closed early on Fridays for the Jewish Sabbath. In 1929 or 1930, he enrolled at New York University, where he put on 20 pounds of strudel weight in the first year. He graduated in four years and then returned to Hartford, where he partnered with a bootlegger, Abe Rechtshafer, on a half- legitimate pinball machine business. Together, Papa and Abe went to Providence to buy a whole bunch of these brightly colored machines. They distributed them to various taverns in the Hartford area until he had enough money (with a little bit of help from a Jewish loan group) to put a down payment on a used Chevrolet.

When Papa Lou Lou died, I had just turned twelve. I had been to a cemetery before, but never for the purpose of gathering with family members in dark dresses and leaking mascara to shovel wads of dirt onto a pine casket. I remember feeling self-conscious that I was wearing a red sweater while everyone else was wearing black. But I also remember that feeling self-conscious is what led me to choose to wear red and not black in the first place. It wasn’t that I was in denial. I wasn’t. I knew that Papa Lou Lou had died peacefully in his home. But wearing black seemed to suggest to friends and family that I could make sense of what had happened. It made me a person capable of feeling the force of someone’s death. I also knew that not wearing black was something I could get away with because of still being young. At twelve years old, I could squeeze out a few more years of pretending that I thought people live forever—not that they live forever (I wasn’t that young), but that they never had to die.

What I remember most is watching my cousin who had asked me that question crying, and my dad’s father crying, and my dad not crying, but looking appropriately sad and poised while delivering the eulogy. “I asked my grandfather once, what’s the secret to reaching old age?” read my dad. “Anyone can do it,” Papa
Lou Lou had responded, “You just have to live long enough.” I was right about the fact that I didn't cry when Papa Lou Lou died just shy of his 99th birthday. Purim came early in 2007, but he still didn't make it to 99.

My dad closed the composition book just as a police car pulled up to the cemetery gate. A woman got out of the car and sauntered over to where we were standing.

“Hey, Theresa!” Lisa called out, and the woman smiled and pushed her sunglasses onto her head. Lisa introduced Theresa to us as a community services police officer originally from New Jersey. Theresa passed a Dunkin’ Donuts iced coffee cup between her hands, making a metronome of her acrylic nails hitting plastic. Lisa told me that through their efforts to combat vandalism in the cemeteries, the two of them have become great friends. She pointed at the two-story housing project beside us.

“The woman in that apartment was throwing her dirty diapers out the second floor window and into the cemetery.” Theresa crinkled her nose and threw back her head before shrugging with a sort of cynical resignation.

“You know, you think to yourself, how could they do that? How could they throw dirty diapers out the window onto the headstones? But you have to see what they live like. It all starts in the house. The kids run around in bare feet and the floors are covered in cat litter and literal dog shit.”

My dad and I made visors of our hands and peered up toward the second-story window. We studied the building hard, pretending whatever it was we were looking for that morning could be traced in this upward glance.
“You ever seen that Show ‘Good Times?’” Theresa asked. “The one from the 70s? That’s how I make it through. It’s all family all the time.” My dad’s eyes widened as if he was reminded of something he hadn’t realized he’d forgotten, and together, he and Theresa reminisced about the good ol’ Christian values, the Dave Grusin theme song, and Jimmie Walker’s catchphrase, dy-no-mite! They laughed and laughed. I smiled, though had never seen the show they were talking about.

Staticky voices vibrated from the portable radio clipped to Theresa’s belt. My expression must have suggested something funny or naive, because Theresa smiled at me as she spoke into the radio.

“Yeah, I’ll be over soon,” she said, voice cool as ever. She told us a fifteen year old Indian boy had thrown himself off a bridge after getting in a fight with his father. Theresa clipped the radio back to her belt. The moment was full of the clicks of black-tipped nails and the chemical rush of dissipating joy. Dy-no-mite! Dy-no-mite! Something heavy consumed the joy of the preceding moment.

“This is the reality tour,” said Lisa in a momentary breach of silence. I got back in her car wondering what exactly she meant.

My dad went to work at the Hartford, and Lisa and I continued on our journey. She stopped and ordered a vanilla coffee at the Dunkin’ Donuts in the North End. We talked about the cemeteries as fenced-off sites of stagnancy amidst shifting neighborhoods and demographics.

“These places are going to be here a lot longer than the people around them,” she told me. “So we need to take care of them.”

We drove in silence for several minutes until we arrived at Capital City Lodge, a small plot of land within the Zion Hill Cemetery, where people are buried who never belonged to a synagogue yet wanted to be buried in a Jewish community. The plot was
adjacent to a potter’s field of unidentified non-Jewish people buried without headstones.

Lisa pointed to a scorched tree, which had almost burned down completely when a man who was living in the cemetery fried an egg on a headstone. There were vinyl purses and bloody tampons, prescription bottles that caught the light in a way that turned the grass blotchy and orange. Behind a hole in the chain-link fence, a mausoleum displayed a line of laundry, each article of clothing laid flat against the rock face, stale and crinkled the way cotton gets when it line-dries in cool air. Lisa pointed to the space behind an L-shaped wall where people throw parties. Hypodermic needles, condoms, bank statements, a waxy drawing torn from a coloring book—not the people who make up a space but the traces they leave behind, their DNA and the stories they tell. We drove by a mattress nestled between two graves.

Lisa pointed to a mostly empty field. “This one only gets one or two burials a year. Like if someone’s husband died in 1960, and she had been waiting to be buried next to him ever since.”

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One night over the summer, when my family was in Page, Arizona, a town of 7,000 on the Navajo Reservation along the Glen Canyon Dam, we sat down for an Italian dinner. Strombolli’s was the name of the place, recommended to us by our Colorado River rafting guide from earlier that day. The waitresses were mostly young Navajo women living on the reservation who found work at the family-run pizza joint. Our guide, Kyle, a Boise native and third-year student at BYU Idaho, had suggested the restaurant partly for its three-star pizza and partly because his newly-wedded wife was working there at the time. He never told us her name (she remained my wife for
the duration of the tour) so we weren’t sure if she was serving us or the German
travelers to our right.

Kyle had told us stories about his wife while we were out on the raft. The first
time he met her extended Navajo family, he sat down with her baby cousin—jingling
keys and contorting his Anglo-American face, rosy from afternoons on the river, into
silly expressions. The baby broke out in hiccups, then giggles, then fits of full-body
laughter—the kind of laughter one feels when experiencing joy for the first time,
which the baby was. Everyone rushed over to Kyle, which he interpreted as early
approval from the clan he was marrying into. Little did he know that because he had
induced the baby’s first laugh (and therefore the baby’s first conscious human
experience), Kyle would have to prepare a traditional Navajo feast for the entire
community.

My family’s laughter about the baby’s laughter turned into a conversation about
our own family, as conversations tend to do when the five of us sit down for dinner
together. The air was warm that night in Arizona, and the next day we would move
through space in a rented minivan to see a National Park that we knew
from photographs. We didn’t yet know what that would feel like, to recognize something
we’d never seen.

While served Strombolli’s specialty margarita pizza by a young Navajo woman,
we talked about the Ashkenazic Jewish tradition to name children in honor of dead
relatives. And how arbitrary it is that these names bear their memories, contain
meaning at all. My name could have been Ethan or Edith or Sadye or Sydney, which
my mom liked but my dad associated with the name with his best friend’s dying
grandfather. Who would we be if our relatives had died in a different order, if we were
born at different times? But by laughing, I think we were exclaiming something more
Akin to, “how strange!” How strange it is that our lives and our language overlap with anyone else's in this world. And how strange that certain deaths gave rise to the language in which we are now caught.

Does a person become a person when he crosses the Atlantic at eleven years old with MON FRERE and not even a sugar sac, we wondered? Or when a girl whose name means beautiful in a language that is almost forgotten laughs at the jingle-jangle of a Mormon boy's keys? Some questions we fashioned with words and some crinkled in the dry heat. We didn't have answers for each other. We devoured that famous three-star pizza, exhausted and a little burned from just one week of Arizona sun.

Lisa drove slowly, and I watched the graves pass. She parked the car next to Hartford City Lodge, a grassy space reserved for those who die without any family. Our final stop of the day.

She told me that sometimes, even if the deceased have no one in their lives, they can still be identified as Jewish. It may take days or weeks for the dead body to be discovered, but if the person happened to be wearing a Star of David necklace or left Shabbat candles on the kitchen table, then five or six of Lisa's coworkers and friends will pile in the backseat of her car (along with a rabbi who she knows will work for free) and conduct a funeral entirely of strangers. She gets some money from the state for a modest pine casket. “Jewish tradition doesn't require anything fancy,” she told me.

We arrived back at my house, and the driveway was empty. My parents were at work, and no one was home. My German shepherd ran out of the house and planted herself outside the front door. She shook with excitement. When she wagged her tail, her whole body swayed.
I lingered in the car for a few moments longer and asked Lisa about the Airedale terrier bumper sticker on the back of her car. She told me that dog-owners always fear that their dogs will die when they are away on vacation, during that precise window of time in which they will not be there to watch them go. That's what had happened with Riley when she was in Memphis. She showed me pictures of the dog curled up on the couch in her living room and playing in the dark green pachysandra that carpets her backyard.

I told her about Libby, the dog I grew up with, who had died from a kidney infection four years earlier. My mom sat beside her on the blue couch in our living room, her tears matting down Libby's thinning yellow fur. My brother and sister were there and they were also crying. My dad was not crying, but looked appropriately sad as he lifted Libby over his shoulder and laid her across the backseat of his car. He hadn't held her like this since she was a puppy, but she had lost a lot of weight when her kidney stopped working. And now he could lift her with ease.
In 2007, Charles Bowden published the essay, “The Bone Garden of Desire” in Esquire Magazine. I read it once three years ago and then again three times this week, and I still don't understand it. Well, that's not exactly true. I understand that it's about flowers and cooking and Bowden grieving the death of several of his friends, who all died within a short period of time. Art and Chris die of cancer, Paul hangs himself, and Dick, though an alcoholic, slips on a rug and hits his head on the dining room table while sober.

“Being alive is gardening and cooking and birds and green and blue, at the very least,” Bowden writes. “And death is a word and life is a fact, just as food is a fact and cactus is a fact.” I understand that this has something to do with Bowden rejecting the words of respect and the meaning of it all—the saran-wrapped casseroles and bouquets of sympathy lilies. The words that surround death and the gestures that deliver solace, he says, prevent us from experiencing the things that happen—the things that change and the things that don’t change—when a person we love dies. These experiences are not subtle ones. They are not reduced to five stages (“Is it seven or twelve or what? fuck, I can’t remember”) or to the ready-made words of Hallmark cards. These experiences are carnal—the metallic smell of cilantro, a sudden craving for strawberry Jell-O, the sight of dark-green cactus flesh in a garden at night. Death is a flower without the meaning ascribed to that flower, a scent that is strong and a flavor that is bitter and lasts a long long time. Words like “grief,” “death,” and “fear” don’t touch his wounds, he says. But senses like these, they fill us up if we let them in.

So, I guess, what I don't understand is how he seems to be talking directly to me. It's silly, I know. He isn't really. But if feels that way when he writes:
In the garden, there is no subtlety. A flower is in your face and is never named Emily. Be careful of the words; go into the bone garden and then taste desire. So it has taken months and it is still a matter of the tongue and of lust. And if you go toward that light and find it, piss on it for me.

I used to want a name so unique it would differentiate me from my classmates, suggest something interesting about who I am through language itself. Now, I want a name so unique it will not appear in pieces of writing like this one. It's not that it's uncommon for a character to be named Emily. It's a popular girls’ name. In fact, the most popular one between 1996 and 2007 (in 2008, Emma and Isabella knocked Emily to number three). Rather, it's about the false meaning of it all, the illusion of something designed just for me. It's about the way Bowden is using this name as a stand-in of sorts, a word that extends beyond its designating function. Maybe that illusion is what draws me close to Bowden and his garden of bones and desire. The weight of self-possession pushes my body into his essay. I am desperate to find meaning in my name.

The name, Emily, appears only once in Bowden's essay. Emily is not a character. The characters are Art and Chris and Paul and Dick, who dies clean, and the wives and the ex-wives of these men, who sometimes speak the way that they think and sometimes guard their hearts with words. My first time reading the essay, I thought that I had misread it. Or, even worse perhaps, that I had projected some gaping hole in my identity right onto the page. Several friends of mine assured me that I was not crazy. Those letters, E-M-I-L-Y, were written, just like that, to form that word, that name, my name, in Bowden's piece.

*A flower is in your face and is never named Emily.* A flower is the subject of the sentence, not Emily. A flower is never named Emily, which means that in no case can a
flower be named Emily, even though the sentence hinges on the possibility of a flower being named Emily, or else Bowden would not have needed to indicate that, in this case, it is not. If a flower is never named Emily and is in your face, can something named Emily ever be in your face? Given the logic of the original sentence, something other than a flower named Emily occasionally being in your face would serve as a counterexample to the proposed general rule. Flowers are not subtle because they are not named Emily, a substitute word for the subtle, false language that surrounds a thing. The flower is the thing itself. It is only not subtle when it is not named something.

So what is it about the name, Emily, that cannot describe a flower? Is being “in your face” good or bad, or are values like that useless when tacked onto language? Is it a confrontation of sorts, or something more delicate, like bending over in a garden full of roses to get a better smell?

I know my name is not just mine. To think my self is lodged in language would mean that words are adequate, that I was written into consciousness by a fixed assortment of letters. This etymological fallacy not only neglects the construction and evolution of words and meanings, but makes me feel selfish. Not selfish exactly, but wrapped in myself —silly for believing too fervently in the ability of words to transmit meaning and memories. If anything, my name is not my name at all. Emily Rose. These names were given to me in honor of other people: Edith Haas, my paternal great-great-grandmother, and Rose Berman and Rosa Levin, both of my maternal great-great-grandmothers. They died before I was born, but Jewish tradition tells me that Emily and Rose bear their memories. I’m not sure if this is true, but it feels good to remember people in this way. But be careful of the words, Bowden warns.

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Over the summer, my sister, Charlotte, sent me a picture of a flat gravestone with five-point ivy leaves carved into the granite corners. There was a Star of David at the top, as well as three small rounded pebbles lined neatly along the edge. The date read, August 19, 1911 - October 26, 1978, and the name in capital letters across the middle read, SAYDE APTER. At the very bottom of the grave were the hebrew letters, ב צ ה נ, which I later learned were an acronym for the words, *Thay nafsho/ah tzrurah Tzror Hachayim*: “May he or she be bound up in the bond of life.”

In the first Book of Samuel in the Old Testament, King David and his men make their way to the city of Carmel where Abigail, a beautiful and intelligent handmaiden, lives with her wicked sheep-shearer husband, Nabal. King David's men ask Nabal for food and drink, but Nabal publicly insults David, offers him nothing, and sends his men back the way they came. With God on his side, King David arms his men, intending to return to Carmel and punish Nabal for his selfishness. Abigail, however, without telling her husband, gathers “two hundred loaves of bread, two jars of wine, five dressed sheep, five seahs of parched corn, one hundred cakes of raisin, and two hundred cakes of pressed figs” and loads them onto her donkey. She offers the goods to King David and his men, begging them not to listen to her husband. She tells them that his name means “boor,” and that is exactly what he is. She bows before the king and says:

> And if anyone sets out to pursue you and seek your life, the life of my lord will be bound up in the bundle of life in the care of the Lord; but He will fling away the lives of your enemies as from the hollow of a sling.

> As long as King David continues “fighting the battles of the Lord,” then his life will be like a rock. Or, as Abigail's words suggest, secured to the stone-like bond of God's eternal life.
“There is a very beautiful image in the phrase ‘May he or she be bound up in the bond of life,’” my rabbi told me, when I asked him about the acronym, הָבָנָת, and the Jewish tradition of placing pebbles and not flowers on graves.

He told me that the phrase, “bond of life” is taken from the Hebrew words, Tzror Hachayim. A tzror was a bundle of stones that a shepherd would use to keep track of his sheep. When a sheep strayed from the herd, the shepherd would move a stone to the side of the bundle, and when the sheep returned, he would move it back.

“That way” he said, “he’d always know where each animal was.”

Rabbi Rosen described it as a loving metaphor that suggests God is a shepherd who watches over each soul on earth just as a sheepherder does with his bundle of stones. “I think it can also mean that the ways in which people remember loved ones and honor their memories is another way in which each person can continue to be cherished by family and friends, who function in this way as shepherds of a sort.”

And so, it has become Jewish tradition to place pebbles on the grave of a loved one. But what I wanted to know was why not flowers? The shepherds were not keeping track of their animals with flowers, they were doing so with stones. “Clearly, flowers are temporary,” Rabbi Rosen said, though, to me, the distinction between permanence and non-permanence was cloudy as ever. He smiled at me as of to say of course!

“Why should things like this be simple?” he asked. His voice was soft and reminded me of my father’s. I wasn’t sure if he was looking for an answer.

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At this point, I had never seen Sadye’s gravestone in person, though I recognized the name of my great-grandmother carved into the stone. It was Father’s Day 2016 when my sister sent me the photograph, and my parents and two siblings had spent the day in my dad’s hometown of Manchester, CT. They drove past the
house where my dad grew up, ate black raspberry ice cream at his favorite 1950s-style
diner, and visited the graves of his grandparents, Papa Lou Lou and Sadye Apter. A
follow-up text from my sister clarified why she sent me a picture of Sadye's grave in the
first place. Her name was spelled SAYDE not SADYE. “Mom and dad spelled my
name wrong : ( ” is what she texted.

Charlotte was referring to her middle name, Sadye, in honor of her great-
grandmother. The name was always a source of pride for my sister and not just
because of its old-fashioned trendiness. She always loved the spelling. It was a family
name, a family spelling, a simple yet uncommon arrangement of letters that implied
something special about her great-grandmother and also about herself.

Papa Lou Lou met Sadye Cohen in July or August of 1935, and they were
engaged by the end of the year. Though he was dating a girl named Betty Kapman at
the time, Papa knew he could never marry Betty because she smoked two packs of
cigarettes a day and could drink three beers in one sitting. “But she was good
company,” he wrote. “And that’s how I met my Sadye—Sadye with a Y .” One day, before
Papa and Sadye had met, they were both visiting Betty, who was in bed with a fever.
Papa asked to walk Sadye home to her house in New Britain, CT, but Sadye refused.
She was engaged to a man named Appel at the time, who had just graduated from
pharmacy school and was planning on opening his own drug store. Appel had given
Sadye an expensive engagement ring and a shared bank account, but Papa was not
deterred. He called her every day, and every day she turned him down. Until one day,
she did not. I mean, how could she resist a skinny Jewish boy from Brody with a half-
legitimate pinball machine business and a love of strudel? “Louis Apter, the gangster
came along,” is how Papa described himself when he wrote out the story for my dad. I
imagine him laughing while writing this line in Tamarac, Florida. He took his beloved Sadye on a date, and she called off her engagement.

Papa Lou Lou couldn't afford an engagement ring, so he bought Sadye a wristwatch from his friend who owned a jewelry shop. They got married in a synagogue on Winter Street in New Britain, and Papa wore a top hat. It was the worst wedding he ever attended, he wrote, because his mother-in-law-to-be invited everyone she had ever met (“My daughter is getting married,” she said, “please come!”), and his father-in-law-to-be hadn't spent enough money on food. By 5:00 PM, they had run out of bread.

They spent their week-long honeymoon at the Taft Hotel in Manhattan, where Sadye stood at the windowsill, watching the Broadway lights flare and fade and then flare again until two o'clock in the morning. They had the best steak dinner of their lives for $5.00, while two violinists played a duet they believed was composed just for them. They had sex for the first time as morning's grey light bled into Times Square in the 1930s.

Papa Lou Lou wrote about Sadye on December 27, 1997 while in the car with his second wife, Gladys, who was getting her hair done for the third time that week. Gladys is buried in the same cemetery in Manchester, in a shady patch several steps away from Papa Lou Lou and Sadye; a plot had been reserved next to her first spouse as well. Papa Lou Lou finished writing the section on Sadye by acknowledging her death on October 26, 1978. They had been married for 42 years. “When your Grandma Sadye passed away,” he wrote to my dad, “I never thought she would die.” I guess, dying implied the end of something, a severing he didn't quite believe in. Papa Lou Lou knew his Sadye with a Y would stay with him like a stone.
Unlike Molly and Sam, Sadye and Papa Lou Lou’s headstones lay flat on the earth, side-by-side and facing up toward the sky. From the other side of the street, the cemetery might not appear to be a cemetery at all. It would look like any other field of grass. Though my dad had visited his grandparents’ graves several times since Papa Lou Lou’s death in 2007, that summer afternoon was the first time my mom and two siblings had been back.

None of them noticed the misspelling at first, and when they did, they didn't know if it was a misspelling at all. They placed pebbles on the granite with a faint clink and turned back toward the minivan. That’s when my mom pointed it out. It was the first time since Sadye's death in 1978 that someone had looked at her gravestone and thought, “Hey, wait...Is that the right spelling?”

When they told me the story of the cemetery visit later on, I couldn't help but think about Beloved. Not of Papa Lou Lou’s “Beloved Sadye,” as he often referred to her—though, of course, she was on my mind as well—but of Toni Morrison's 1987 novel set in Cincinnati, Ohio just after the American Civil War.

In the novel, Sethe and her daughter, Denver, live in a house on 124 Bluestone Road, which is haunted by the ghost of Sethe's first-born daughter, Beloved. Sethe’s mother-in-law, Baby Suggs dies within the novel's first few pages. At the end of Baby Suggs's life, all she desires are little bits of color from the outside world—flowers and other bright objects that her daughter-in-law can find. “And since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy left her for pondering color.” Baby Suggs filled her final moments—the ones that, when death comes, she will anything but forget—with intense sensory experiences of the present: whorls of lavender, the pink of her daughter’s tongue, the deep shade of the Midwest sky in winter.
At Beloved’s funeral, Sethe mistakes the beginning of the preacher’s eulogy as a description of her dear child, and, because of this mistake, infuses the otherwise hackneyed words, “Dearly Beloved,” with personal meaning. Sethe then trades ten minutes of sex with the tombstone engraver for the word, “Beloved,” carved into stone.

Ten minutes for seven letters. With another ten could she have gotten ”Dearly” too? She had not thought to ask him and it bothered her still that it might have been possible—that for twenty minutes, a half hour, say, she could have had the whole thing [...] But what she got, settled for, was the one word that mattered [...] Not only did she have to live out her years in a house palsied by the baby’s fury at having its throat cut, but those ten minutes she spent pressed up against dawn-colored stone studded with star chips, her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life, more alive, more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil.

Once in stone, “beloved” functions as both noun and adjective, mediating the relationship between the living and the dead through the language attached to Beloved’s character after she is killed. At the same time, as Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock puts it in “Ten Minutes for Seven Letters: Reading Beloved’s Epitaph,” “beloved “[confronts] the haunting limitations of language and [engages] in a process of mourning that inevitably will fail to capture or reconstitute the other.” The novel is as much about Beloved, the ghost child, as it is about “beloved,” the word, bent toward the child’s designation only after her death, only after her mother’s legs slide open and chisel touches granite in the hands of a strange engraver.

The car ride home from the cemetery was a panicked one. My parents extended their collective memories back 16 years to my sister’s birth, searching frantically for the source of the DYE/YDE mishap. Had they simply misspelled Sadye's
name on Charlotte’s birth certificate? Had Sadye spelled her name S-A-Y-D-E all along? The uncertainty carried with it what felt like life-shattering implications about my sister’s identity. How does this snag of transmission affect the way memory is carried between generations? What does it mean for something like Beloved or Dearly Beloved or S-A-Y-D-E to be etched into stone? My sister sat silently in the backseat of the car on Father’s Day. The seal of Y before E had been cracked open. And something gooey and shapeless leaked onto the minivan floor.

“Worst case, we created a new family spelling,” said my dad, attempting to assuage the growing tension. “It doesn’t matter exactly how Sadye spelled her name, because this is how we spell it now.” I don’t know if he believed what he was saying, but if felt like the right thing to say to my sister at the time. They were left to think about a mistake that was possibly not a mistake—a name invented by a dyslexic headstone engraver or a misspelling on a birth certificate. Either way, a mistake made so long ago that its significance has changed alongside the evolution of language. As Morrison notes in her Nobel Lecture from 1993, “The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers. Although its poise is sometimes in displacing experience it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie.”

My family made its way out of my dad’s hometown and back into West Hartford.

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Before going to the cemetery, my family had visited my dad’s old house, where Papa Lou Lou’s son, Bernard (my Papa), and his wife Susan had continued to live until they resettled to a condo in Boynton Beach several years ago. They had sold the moss-colored house, but my grandfather had made my dad promise to continue checking in
on it. I don’t think he cares too much about the house itself. What he cares about is his precious garden.

Gardening was my Papa’s hobby turned obsession. It seemed to me the last real pull toward staying in the Northeast (besides his family, of course). While living in Manchester, Papa planted over six hundred varieties of hostas. His hostas became his his most prized possessions. The large waxy leaves ranged from golden yellow to silvery blue and sprawled across his backyard with a manicured ferocity. Every year on his birthday, my family would buy him decor for the garden: greenish stone frogs or wire butterflies that caught the wind. We even got him the occasional t-shirt or grilling apron with something like, “Hosta La Vista, Baby” printed across the front. Wordplay like that makes him smile.

Papa planted other flowering plants as well, like heritage roses and hydrangea stained lavender from a buildup of aluminum in the soil. My grandmother photographed these flowers with her Nikon and telephoto lens and hung them in their bathroom. He gave them soil, fertilizer, water from a can, and she gave them pixels, matte ink, and wooden frames. He gave them life, and she made them last. But, eventually, the winters got colder and the house and the garden grew too big to maintain. My Grandma and Papa went south to Florida.

Several of my grandmother’s photographs hang on my bedroom wall in West Hartford. One in particular of a pale pink rose pistil she gave me when I was born. “The Emily Rose,” she called it. Taken just for me. I always liked the way that sounded: The Emily Rose. Emily Rose was, of course, a pairing of names I was used to hearing if I was in trouble with my parents, for example, or if anyone brought up the “based on a true story” horror film, “The Exorcism of Emily Rose” from 2005. It also brings to mind “A Rose for Emily,” a short story written by William Faulkner in 1930 about a
spinsters named Emily, who is ostracized by her Mississippi community after the death of her father, and who sleeps next to the decomposing corpse of her lover until she dies of old age. There are no roses in the story, but Faulkner later noted, “Here was a woman who has had a tragedy and nothing could be done about it, [...] a woman you would hand a rose.” I learned about this story from the old woman running Faulkner House Books, a small bookstore in the author’s former home in New Orleans. I hadn’t read Faulkner before, and she suggested I begin with her favorite, “A Rose for Emily.”

“This is my Emily Rose,” my dad said playfully, putting his arm around me though perhaps not making it totally clear that Emily Rose was my actual name. The woman grimaced in a way that we understood only after reading the story. We hadn’t known what the story was about.

Emily Rose echoed with familiarity and sent me searching for actual rose varieties that shared my name. I wondered if Emily could modify a type of flower in the same way that Rose (and other flower-inspired names: Lily, Violet, Heather, Daisy, Dahlia, etc.) appropriates the beauty of a flower to identify a living breathing person. The closest I could find was something called the Emily Gray Rose, which, according to backyardgardener.com, is a climbing plant with sweet-smelling yellow flowers, loosely formed petals, and dark glossy leaves. This flower blooms in early summer and is particularly susceptible to pests and diseases. I don’t think that this is the exact type of rose my grandmother had in mind when she took the photograph, or when she wrote “The Emily Rose” in pencil at the bottom of the frame. But there was something about the addition of “the” that performed the linguistic work I was looking for in Emily Gray. My grandmother’s “the” drew attention not to the flower—not to the photograph—but to the title it was given, to the language used to envelop it.
Of course, there is the implication that I am the only Emily Rose, but I know that’s not true. At the very least, there is a girl I went to summer camp who has the same first-name-middle-name pairing, as well as Jennifer Carpenter’s character in the movie who gets purged of the devil. What I liked about the title of this photograph was that, all of the sudden, my first name was an adjective. I became the modifier. The rose remained itself, and I helped describe it. Though, of course, according to Bowden, a flower is never named Emily.

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In her essay, “Toys R Us,” in Persons and Things, Barbara Johnson writes about Polish poet, Wislwa Szymborska’s, “Conversation with a Stone,” in which the speaker knocks six times on a stone, hoping to be let inside. Six times she is refused entrance.

It’s only me, let me come in.
I want to enter your insides,
have a look around,
breathe my fill of you.”
“Go away,” says the stone.
“I’m shut tight.
Even if you break me to pieces,
we’ll all still be closed.
You can grind us to sand,
we still won’t let you in.

The speaker grows more and more desperate to enter.

I’ve come out of pure curiosity.
Only life can quench it

My mortality should touch you

I hear you have great empty halls inside you,
unseen, their beauty in vain,
soundless, not echoing anyone’s steps.”
“You shall not enter,” says the stone.
“You lack the sense of taking part.
No other sense can make up for your missing sense of taking part.
Even sight heightened to become all-seeing
will do you no good without a sense of taking part.
You shall not enter, you have only a sense of what that sense should be,
only its seed, imagination.”

"It's only me, let me come in.
"I don't have a door," says the stone.

Johnson makes the point that there is no defense against anthropomorphism
without anthropomorphism itself: “[The poem] perfectly illustrates the booby traps
that figurative language can lay for those who think they are avoiding it.” The language
that surrounds the stone subsumes the meaning of the stone itself. At the same time,
the figurative language is what enables the stone to denounce its own symbolic
meaning in the first place. In order to deny its own meaning, the stone must
simultaneously confirm the possibility of a great empty hall of beauty inside of it. The
stone is a stone and nothing can change that, not even words. Both despite and
because of the language, the speaker is left standing outside of something that the
stone cannot open. Bowden writes:

Too many words choking me, clutching at my throat until they strangle any
bad words I might say. Death isn't the problem. The words are, the lies are [...] I
have crawled back from someplace where it was difficult to taste food and
where the flowers flashing their crotches in my face all but lacked scent.

The “sense of taking part,” of experiencing the thing itself, is what the speaker
in Szymborska's poem lacks, what language only offers a sense of. Language is
imagination, the seed, but not the flashing flower itself with spread legs and sweet
stench. We need something empty, jam-packed full of nothing but itself to leave on the
gravestones of people we once loved. Unlike a flower, the pebble has a permanence that we know doesn't actually exist.

Lisa Vaeth spends a lot of time in cemeteries, and therefore a lot of time around Jewish gravestones. She stores a Ziploc bag full of pebbles in the trunk of her car for easy-access respect for the dead. Whenever she goes to the North End to remove an old mattress or dispose of a chicken carcass, she leaves small pebbles on top of the graves. She wants to pay respect to the ancestors Hartford's Jewish community, especially because hardly any of these cemeteries receive visitors anymore. But sometimes, she tells me, only sometimes, she places tiny forget-me-nots on certain gravestones instead of pebbles. Perhaps these people mean a bit more to her. Or perhaps it has to do with the flower itself. The name is an imperative: don't forget me, the flower pleads. It demands something from the people who hear and utter its name. Though maybe those are just the words speaking.

Forget-me-not, the common name of the plant Scorpion Grass or Myosotis, comes from the French Ne m'oubliez. The Oxford English Dictionary tells me that the plant thrives in damp soil and produces little cobalt petals with one central yellow eye. The name of the plant dates back to the 15th century when those who pinned the tiny flowers to their broadcloth dresses believed they would never be erased from the minds of their loved ones. An alternative narrative traces the etymology to the bitterness the flower leaves on the tongues of those who taste it. Those yellow eyes are not sweet like syrup. Bitter is the taste of petals on the tongue, the flavor of remembering. Death is anything but forgetfulness, says Morrison.

In “The Bone Garden of Desire,” Charles Bowden writes of a different kind of flower, Selenicereus plerantus, a cactus species whose white petals and yellow teeth
open only at night. The “Queen of the Night,” as it's more commonly known, snakes high overhead, crawls through the tree branches of the garden where Bowden walks.

This flower touches your face, it kisses your ear, its tongue slides across your crotch [...] It opens only on the hottest nights of the year, black evenings when the air is warmer than your body and you cannot tell where your flesh ends and the world begins.

I think what Bowden is saying is that this flower is not drenched in the symbolism of itself. This flower confronts you with your own experience of it. Maybe Jewish people should place this giant, night-blooming cactus on the graves of their ancestors. This flower is not a symbol. This flower does not say, “Do not forget.” This flower says, “I am here.”

***

It took a few days, but eventually we verified that Sadye did in fact spell her name with a Y-E. My dad flipped back through Papa Lou Lou's composition book where Papa not only spelled Sadye’s name S-A-D-Y-E when referring to her, but, as if anticipating our confusion, calls her “My Sadye with a Y.” A communal sigh of relief passed through my family, as if we had dodged some sort of rippling multi-generational identity crisis. That was a close one. We nearly did what though—forgot her? Got it all wrong? Set the wrong thing in stone?

In the final lines of Bowden’s piece, he writes “By the time I got to the restaurant that night, everybody had died on me. And I carried this fact around with me like a stone. But it did not hurt my appetite.”

When Sadye and Rose and Rosa died before I was born, their loved ones placed pebbles on their graves with a faint clink. These are the pebbles that populate riverbeds and shingle beachfronts. They line the paths of my Papa’s hosta garden and
are gathered into bundles by shepherds keeping track of their sheep. Sometimes, like Bowden, I go out to dinner and carry with me facts and experiences that resemble something sedimentary. Though sometimes I open a Ziploc bag, pull out a pebble, and beg to be let inside its home.

I’ve been looking at the photographs of flowers that line the walls of the house my grandparents no longer live in. Those photographs were taken in the garden that Papa Lou Lou’s son planted, and where the rose grew that my grandmother named after me the day I was born. My great-great-grandmothers were named after that rose long before its flesh broke the earth and the world began. See, even now, I am doing what Bowden warns against and wrapping things like life and death in metaphors, symbols, sweet smells, and colors. He says a flower is in your face and is never named Emily. I do not know what it means for a flower not to be named Emily when I am trying so hard not to forget.
On September 18, 2015, Lisa Vaeth went to the Jewish War Veteran Cemetery in the North End of Hartford with a small ceramic Star of David the size of a Christmas ornament that she had painted cornflower blue. Across the front, it read “We Remember” in white stenciled letters and, on the back, in curly handwriting that bled at the edges from a Sharpie’s dulled tip, it said “To: Laura Love, Mom 2015.” It was Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, when Lisa leaned the star against Laura’s pink granite headstone. She placed it in the line of rounded pebbles (each of which she had placed there on a past visit), spent several silent moments honoring the eight-month-year old baby she never knew, and drove home. She had penned the message signed “Love, Mom” though she was not the mother of the infant who was buried there. In fact, Lisa has no kids of her own. Though she told me that her job does get especially busy on Mother’s Day.

When she got to her house in New Britain, Lisa was greeted by her Airedale terrier. She sat at her computer and composed an email to Doris Cinicove, Laura’s actual mother, who grew up in Hartford and was living there with her husband, Jim, in March of 1966 when their daughter was born. They didn’t know it at the time, but they would only remain in Hartford for another eight months, for, when Laura died suddenly the following October from meningitis, they wasted no time getting out of town. In the email, she told Doris that it had been the Jewish High Holy Days, and so she had placed the ceramic Star of David on Laura’s grave in Doris’s honor.

Six months passed, and March rolled around. Lisa made her way to the War Veteran Cemetery for what would have been Laura’s 50th birthday. It was just past 6:00AM when she arrived, and the sky matched the shade of Laura’s gravestone, the
pinkish flush of an inner eyelid, finger pressed against the eye. Lisa removed several stones from the sealed Ziploc bag in her trunk and added them to the miniature cairn in front of Laura’s grave. The blue ceramic star was still there from her visit on Rosh Hashanah and popped nicely against the whole rose-colored scene. She spent another few moments thinking about the 50th birthday of a baby forever frozen at eight months old, snapped a photograph, and drove home—and all before the sun had fully risen over Hartford. After sending another email to Doris with the subject “happy birthday!”, she received a response (in Doris’s usual turquoise Comic Sans typeface) that read:

    You are just fantastic and so caring.......we all love you and thank you for your wonderful kindness.......we have a beautiful candle burning for her. I feel so sad inside but know she is loved.......thank you again, Lisa....what a wonderful picture.

    Before Laura’s death, Doris and her husband had been attending marital counseling at Jewish Family Services. The didn’t belong to a synagogue, so when Laura died suddenly in November of 1966, they called the Services to help them manage the burial process. The Jewish War Veteran Cemetery had the most available space at the time and so, without thinking twice, they bought Laura a plot. Doris’s husband was working as an architect at the time and designed a granite gravestone with a lamb etched into the top and forget-me-nots nestled in the bottom corners. The stone was not finished in time for the graveside funeral that was held days after Laura’s death. And, immediately following the funeral, Doris and Jim got the hell out of Hartford. Doris only ever saw early sketches of the headstone that read, “Our Beloved Daughter” before leaving the city where she had always lived. Doris and Jim separated, and Doris moved to Marana, Arizona, where she has lived ever since.
About nine years ago, Doris retired from her teaching job and decided it was time to check in on her daughter’s grave. She hadn’t been back to Hartford since the funeral and didn’t know if the grave was being cared for. Not only did she not remember the name of the cemetery where her daughter was buried, but she felt deeply ashamed for having never visited and for allowing herself to live a life in which she didn’t know if anyone was watching over her daughter.

She called several funeral homes in the area and was referred to Lisa Vaeth. There is no digital database for the Jewish people buried in Hartford, only a handwritten book of names compiled by a rabbi, who, in the 1990s, walked row by row through the cemeteries and wrote down all the names. Having worked with the Jewish Cemeteries for the past 15 years, however, Lisa is the best resource for people suddenly compelled to search for a lost, Hartford-based relative.

“I know this is a strange question,” Doris told Lisa when they finally connected over the phone. “But my daughter is buried somewhere in Hartford.” She proceeded to tell Lisa the little that she remembered—simply that her daughter died when she was eight months old in 1966 and that her husband designed the headstone, which Doris had never seen in person. She hadn’t even said the name of her baby yet when Lisa cut her off.

“Oh yeah, Laura!”

“How did you know that?”

Lisa described the little pink gravestone with the lamb carved into the top that rests near the entrance to the War Veteran Cemetery. It’s set apart from the other graves, slouches downhill as if gesturing back toward the road. Out of the 8,000 or so stones that Lisa oversees across Hartford—some toppled over or vandalized or used
for vodou sacrifices—this one had stood out to her. She always wondered why it was there. What could have happened so that this baby was buried here of all places?

“But, you know, I had nobody to ask,” she told Doris. “So I never found out.”

“I can't believe you know her.”

Lisa told me that after that initial conversation with Doris, she went to the War Veteran Cemetery for the first time with the purpose of visiting Laura’s grave. Now, she returns every year for the Jewish holidays, Laura’s birthday, and the anniversary of her death. She always brings stones, though sometimes she plants tiny forget-me-nots that match the etchings in the corners of the grave. She takes pictures of the whole scene—the slanted stone, those tiny blue flowers with the yellow eyes—and sends them to Doris. They have become great friends, she told me.

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In Lee Edelman’s polemic, No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive, he outlines the universal politics that he terms “reproductive futurism,” the sort of ideological breaking point that keeps political discourse in the sphere of heteronormativity by casting the “possibility of queer resistance” as impossible. These future-affirming politics reinforce the existing social structure that it “intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child.”

This pure and innocent figure of “the Child” fixes the eyes of society on the horizon and locks us into the fantasy that today and tomorrow will one day become the same. The Child demands protection, preservation, and thus represents the teleological progression of time and the linear narrative of history against which queerness is positioned. As Edelman famously notes, “queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one.” And so, when defined as “other” or “in relation
to” normative society, “queerness names the side of those not 'fighting for the children.”

Edelman makes clear the distinction, however, between the Child that propels society toward its collective fantasy of a future and the lived experiences of actual, historical children. Certain figures of children, he writes, have taken their places on the “social stage” and reasserted a compulsion toward reproductive futurism. For example, all of the Annies who have ever danced around on stage and stuck out their chins and grinned, have also sung for a “tomorrow,” which “is always a day away,” as in always deferred by time itself. When Annie sings to her new and wealthy adoptive parents, she could just as well be addressing the idea of “tomorrow,” a fantasy of linear time, upon which the tragedy of her orphanhood rests.

Annie is one of the children we refer to when we say things like “for the children.” These children are the faces of political campaigns. They eternally recur on Broadway and in amateur theater productions, and sing with a sweetness that tugs at our tear ducts and breaks our heart with the possibility that daybreak may never come. These children are never aborted, and they definitely don’t die from meningitis when they are eight months old. These children are not real, actual.

Although Edelman sees children as existing outside of queer relationships, he is not exactly telling people not to reproduce or that they should go around kicking over every stroller they pass on the street. So where does that leave “real” children? Where does that leave someone like Laura Cinicove who was real, actual, in the sense that she was born and lived eight months in this world, but also who is not actual in the way that actual children outgrow their status as Child figures and become the adults who rely on that childish innocence to strive toward something promising, about-to-be-realized, and shimmery on the horizon?
In March of 2016, several weeks after Lisa visited Laura’s grave for her 50th birthday, Doris discovered a box of old photographs that had somehow made it with her from Connecticut to Arizona. She selected eight of them, each stained orange-red as the chemicals in the photographic paper have broken down over the years, and sent them as email attachments to the 50-year-old woman who had visited daughter’s grave across the country. “Don’t look at my hair !!!” Doris wrote (turquoise Comic Sans font, as always). “It was 1966 remember....and the pictures are old.....colors not the best............luv ya!” The photos dated from Laura’s second week home from the hospital all the way to her second to last month of life. Doris must not have taken any photographs when Laura got sick, or, if she did, she didn’t send them to Lisa.

Ever since October 24, 1966, ever since Laura ceased to exist in a material, corporeal sort of way, she has been immortalized as a figure of a Child. Everything about her grave (pink granite, lamb etching), the language (“our beloved daughter,” “To Laura Love, Mom”), the photographs (rosy pink, faded, collecting dust in a box in Arizona) freezes Laura at the age that she died. She is memorialized in a way that is pure, appropriate for a child, for, even 50 years later, Laura is a child, and a child she will remain. The world around her orbits on this infinite loop that it believes is a forward-looking journey. Yet eight-month-year-old Laura endures in dusk-colored granite, photographic paper and ink. She remains that baby girl in the pin-tuck dress and matching bow pinned to wisps of eight-month-old brown hair.

By continuing to exist outside of time, beyond time in some way, Laura defies that linear narrative of history (what Edelman calls “the poor man’s teleology”) in which “meaning succeeds in revealing itself-as itself-through time.” Yet by continuing to exist in the form of the Child, she straps us into this teleological fantasy. Her death
rendered her the ultimate tragedy (a child whose future was stolen) but the tragedy that is necessary to fix our gazes outward.

But this is not just a story about Laura Cinicove. Laura’s memorial seems to point more generally toward the way people (children especially) are remembered and the way meaning and memory are transmitted after a person dies. Where I likely depart from Edelman is in the way I view the web of unconventional relationships that has formed around Laura’s death—because of Laura’s death—that defies normative family structures. Edelman talks about queerness as alternative to reproductive futurism, for it exists outside the social structures that rely on a collective imagination of the future. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, on the other hand, in *Tendencies*, refers to queerness as “The open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.” Though, in many ways, Laura’s eternal status as “Child” reinforces the “future,” Lisa and Doris (though perhaps unqueer in the way they were united by the existence of a child in the first place) have formed a relationship outside heteropatriarchal family units, one that travels across space and time and that lodges itself firmly in the present.

Lisa was born in 1966, the same year as Laura. For Doris, she has stepped into the role of daughter—not as the baby frozen in 1966 but as the adult woman she would have grown up to be. They talk all the time, share stories, emails, and old photographs. And for Laura, for the baby kept 2,500 miles from her mother, Lisa has stepped into the role of mother. Lisa has no actual children of her own. Though Laura is the daughter who she visits on Mother’s Day, for whom she can place stones, plant flowers, and write notes with a dulled Sharpie that she signs, “Love, Mom.”
Doris had marital problems after Laura’s death, which is partly why she ended up in Marana. To this day, she lives there by herself, her relationship with Jim having crumbled shortly after he designed the gravestone that would pique Lisa’s attention 40 years later but that Doris would never see in person. In exchange for the photos that Lisa sends her, Doris sends photos of her backyard (“I want to share our beautiful desert,” she writes)—prickly pears and barrel cactus flowers, little bits of fiery orange and wild pinks that pop against their arid backdrop. Not to mention those Southwest sunsets. Colors leak as if broken into. They affirm something about life and the way it feels to exist in the present moment. Every evening, Doris sits on her back porch to watch the light gather and disperse, event-like. Gather and disperse like the people who look up at the sky and take photographs for people they’ve never met.

In another email with the subject, “dusk tonight,” Doris sent Lisa images of the rabbit that lives in her backyard, lizards basking on a rock, and a family of quails. She was hoping that Lisa could enjoy her semi-dark landscape on an evening in July, soak in the same sort of beauty. Doris sees photographs of Laura’s grave in the city where she grew up but never returned to. And Lisa sees the way the sun breaks cold and hard over Marana in the summer. The baby quails had gathered around their mother’s nest and Doris typed out a short caption. “I didn’t realize the young ones have such big eyes!” she said.

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In Toni Morrison’s Nobel acceptance lecture, she draws on the etiological Tower of Babel story, in which the postdiluvian descendants of Noah reach the land of Shinar and attempt to build a tower tall enough to reach God in heaven. After the Flood, everyone on earth spoke the same language. But when they began building, God fractured their common speech. The tower’s blueprint did not give rise to a
structure that could support the weight of more than one language. And so the tower fell, heaven was not reached, and the material possibility of understanding was scattered across the world like broken glass.

Morrison stresses that the misfortune of the story is usually read as the collapse itself. It was the design of the tower and not the desire for one all-encompassing language (the desire for a tower to heaven in the first place) that betrayed the possibility of communication. She says, “Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature. A little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives period.” Morrison’s reading points to the underlying structural issue of the Tower of Babel—not just the architectural structure but the social structure that produced the idea that one monolithic language would have brought everyone closer to the heaven they imagined. Had the people taken the time to understand other languages, views, and narratives before stacking bricks and setting mortar, perhaps, she writes, “the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet.”

In No Future, Edelman tells a similar story of language, one that he describes as the story of how storytelling fails. He writes of queerness as something that cues us to “the fantasies structurally necessary in order to sustain [social reality] and [engage] those fantasies through […] the linguistic structures that shape them.” For Edelman and Morrison, the hard shards of language scattered across the earth are not what precluded understanding. The misfortune of the Tower of Babel is not that it fell, but that it was built in the first place.

And so this story of failed storytelling points toward its own faulty architecture, gestures toward a meaning that it insists is inadequate yet that the social order generates for itself. As Edelman sees it, this is a story of the “other side of
politics,” the side positioned in relation to the norm that “takes both the value and the burden of that failure upon itself.” Queerness marks the side where “narrative realization and derealization overlap.” Some stories get told, some don’t. They’re all insufficient, in a certain way. But that insufficiency is part of the point.

On the anniversary of Laura’s death in 2011, Doris wrote to Lisa:

So on this day, of Laura’s death,.....I say that I’m so happy we “met” and connected.......it’s very emotional for me that you are caring for me and Laura’s gravestone.....after all these years I’m so glad I wanted to inquire about it......and there you were....MY Angel.......Thanks isn’t enough.

With these words, Doris touches on something (a meaning of some sort? The outskirts of meaning?) that extends beyond her words and their sweet, sans-seraph message. “On this day of Laura’s death,” she writes and situates her words in the eternally returning occasion of her daughter’s death. Quotation marks around the word, “met,” do not reveal a cynical attitude. Rather, through simple punctuation, Doris undertakes a near impossible task: with the only language she has, to encapsulate the way she and Lisa have never occupied the same physical, geographical space, yet have entered each other’s lives in a way both realized and not. They have “met” in a way that defies categories, pre-existing roles, traditional nomenclature. Words like “daughter” and “mother,” “Hartford” and “Marana” mean nothing outside their efforts to label, insert space and distance. Doris wanted Lisa to know that they have met, that Lisa is her angel. She wanted her to glimpse, even just through photographs, the way the sky looks as day breaks on the other side of the country.

I think a lot about the “actual” and the “almost.” I want to dismantle the notion that there exists a difference between the possibility of something and its realization.
My friend tells me about a poem she wants to write called “The Sex Net” that attempts to cohere the web of sexual violences she has experienced, bend them into a narrative that points linearly toward something, anything, intelligible in the future. Incidences like these accumulate over time, stack neatly on top of each other in a way that feels like they should come to make sense. The point of the poem, however, would not be to find meaning (generate meaning) because meaning would imply causality, linearity and, therefore does not exist. She says the poem would deny its own “fantasy of articulation,” flaunt its own failure. When the actual and the almost bleed into sameness, they form not the net but the holes in between.

“Nets have holes,” writes my friend, “but the sex net isn’t even a net, it’s just pretending to be. Actually, it’s a big black garbage bag; once something gets shoved in, it breaks down like compost, loses any meaning outside of what it generates and absorbs.” And, as Maggie Nelson’s encyclopedia tells her in The Argonauts, “It is idle to fault a net for having holes.” Those events we want to make sense of become uneventful, for when violence and the threat of violence (or, more innocuously, the possibility of something and its actualization) occupy the same material reality, no meaning, no future, lies ahead.

All of this makes me think of Laura Cinicove, or perhaps, she makes me think of all of this. Maybe I am reminded of everything by everything else, or maybe it has to do with the way Laura’s story is also a story of failed storytelling. It defies categories of normative identity and relies on the limitations of language to both create and deny its own meanings. Language is part of that net in which I want to collect everything, but also part of that porous apparatus that lets everything slip through the cracks. It creates meaning by filtering meaning and putting names to those gaps, overlaps,
dissonances and resonances, lapses, and excesses that Sedgwick was talking about. It tacks words onto things that are otherwise murky.

At the same time, however, the mesh of possibilities around Laura’s death created a net where things leak through the holes, but where the leaking might be the point. These holes become the foundation for something—not a tower reaching toward heaven, not anything monolithic at all—but of something strong, sturdy, and ever-changing out in the Arizona desert, a desert where brown-speckled birds flock to their mother but eventually leave the nest. Where language is all we have but is never quite enough. And where the young ones have such incredibly big eyes.
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To my parents, with so much love.
Mom, for painting that house yellow and for noticing the Y before E.
Dad, for always being about to ask a question.
NOTES

PREFACE


13 “We tell ourselves...to live”: Didion, Joan. "The White Album." The White Album, Simon and Schuster, 1979, p. 11


14 We extract meaning...know the world: Ibid., 29.

THE ONLY MOVING THING


19 “I was of three minds...three blackbirds”: Ibid., p. 99.


20 “Does Hartford...landlocked streets?”: Ibid., 2.


“A big, beautiful, dangerous thing”: Ibid., 158.


“See the whole thing”: Ibid., 11.


According to McLeod…of expression: Ibid.


“I know noble / In what I know”: Ibid., 100

28 According to the same... ‘Spiritual Disneyland’: Ibid.


31 “He rode over / For blackbirds”: Ibid., 101.

31 “The river / must be flying”: Ibid., 101.

32 “It was evening / In the cedar-limbs”: Ibid., 101.


IN THE CEMETERY WHERE MY GREAT-GREAT-GRANDPARENTS ARE BURIED AND WHERE I HAD NEVER BEEN


44 “Four cold rooms...cockroaches”: Ibid., 8.

44 “Kept the wolf away from the door”: Ibid., 8.


“I am seven...I can't remember”: Ibid.

“In the garden...piss on it for me”: Ibid.


“And if anyone...hollow of a sling”: Ibid., 460.

“Fighting the battles of the lord”: Ibid., 460.


“Louis Apter...came along”: Ibid., 15.

“My daughter...please come!”: Ibid., 16.

“When your grandma...she would die”: Ibid., 27.


“Ten minutes for seven letters...fingers like oil”: Ibid., 5.


Emily Rose was...from 2005: “The Exorcism of Emily Rose.” Directed by Derrickson. Scott. Screen Gems, 2005.
62-63  

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*“Here was a woman…hand a rose”:* Jelliiffe Robert, editor. *Faulkner at Nagano,* Kenkyusha Ltd., 1956, pp. 70-71.

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64-65  

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*“By the time…hurt my appetite”:* Ibid.

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**DUSK TONIGHT**

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*“Queerness can never…disturb one”:* Ibid., 17.

73  
*Queerness names… fighting for the children”:* Ibid., 3.

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*For example, all the Annies…by time itself:* Ibid., 18,

74  

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“The heaven…at their feet”: Ibid.


“Other side of politics,” “Takes both…upon itself,” “narrative…derealization overlap”: Ibid., 7.


“It is idle…having holes”: Nelson, Maggie. The Argonauts. Graywolf Press, 2015, p. 3.
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