

Master's Thesis: Beside Her Self: A Coffin Text

by

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We acknowledge with respect the Lekwungen peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

I did not purposely set down to write this work but was compelled by a painful sense of what I should not do. What I should not write. To protect the privacy and autonomy of individuals, to avoid creating harm, and to resist, however unsuccessfully, essentializing either “mothers” or “addiction,” this work enacts a radical *besideness*, where one subject performs the verb of a second subject, where one subject enlist the aid of other subjects. In the aim of both producing and defying narrative structures that seem to fasten a person to their identity, this collaborative, intertextual project attempts to tell a story, both in what is re-told and in what is not-told. It invokes infelicitous performances as a way of talking back while walking forward.

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Dedication

For sons and mothers

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Section One: Hope by Noon



...they were pregnant and stood there,
with their slender hands instinctively
resting on their large bellies, in which
there were *two* fruits: a child and a
death.

Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte
Laurids Brigge*

Don't sweep the whole female species
together for condemnation
because of your own catastrophe.
We are many—some blameless, some
not.

Euripides, *Hekabe*

Prologue

You are packed and in the car by 8:00am. It's a thirty-minute drive to the ferry. You drive quickly, overtaking cars and staying in the passing lane the entire trip to the ferry terminal. If you miss the nine o'clock ferry, you'll have to wait until the next ferry at eleven, which will mean that a good portion of your trip will be in the dark. Plus, though it seems increasingly unlikely, there is always the possibility that the young man seated beside you in the car will change his mind. Getting off the Island seems imperative.

You come up behind a slow vehicle in the passing lane, a Toyota pickup with ladders strapped to the top and buckets in the truck bed. You decelerate, braking, but not shifting down, and sit right on the bumper of the little truck. The spray from the tires hitting the windshield. You can see through the back window a mop of grey hair, probably an old guy, heading to a job site, listening to the news on the radio, thermos cup in his hand. Your heart thuds as you sit on the truck's bumper, and finally, nearly bursting with rage, toot the horn until the little truck jerks into the slow lane and you speed past, foot solidly pressing on the gas pedal. You make the ferry with five minutes remaining.

Part One: The Ferry

Lily Briscoe sits beside a window overlooking a grey ocean on a ferry travelling from the Island to the mainland. Beside her, in the damp interior, her son James. James is 18, 19, 21, 24. Time is passing as they journey. Always, the rain lashes the windows. From time to time, a gull hovers beside them, seeming to check them out.

James looks grim in the light of day. He has spots on his face which he says are acne but which Lily can see are places where he has been picking at his skin. His hand, of its own volition, rises and searches out those red sores.

Should she write about all this, and if she does, where to begin?

Lily lets her eyes fall on the scene outside the window: a leaden sea, wind-swept trees on a low green island receding as they head out to open water. The same gull? Or a succession of them?

There was the formula that one could follow—beginning, middle, and end—tracing her way backward to the catastrophic moment and the inciting incident. But if she did that, she would have to put one event before the other, a long line of causation that, looked at from the (wrong) end, would render everything—the grief, the tumult, the joyous times—as a train roaring toward a conclusion. In her case, Lily thought, narrative, that tyrant, would want resolution. An end.

There was nothing narrative could demand of Lily's mother. Mrs. Ramsey was dead, and no master, real or imaginary, however tyrannical, could change that event. But it could impose, it could demand that she make sense of the whole thing.

It would want James somewhere, years from hence, recovered from his difficulties. His skin smoothed over, sun-touched, healthful, sprinkled even with grey hairs, striding across a dais scroll in hand, or lounging on a green lawn bouncing a baby on his knee. She would be forced to write him from the catastrophic moment into a resolving recovery.

Recovery being a combination of clear skin and bright prospects. Success, the ability and the desire to give birth to the future. Time's arrow, progress, hope itself made manifest in the body of her only child. And herself? What were the possibilities of writing her self?

Worse yet was the other choice that narrative offered—its hand turning now downward, the punishment for turning away from the fruits of the future. A bony hand, cartoony in its depiction of the skeletal remains of life. Death. It could demand of Lily that a possible outcome would be the end of James.

*

It's a nine-hour drive over several mountain ranges to reach the interior of the province and James's dad's derelict cabin in a remote valley in the Kootenays. Lily is taking James there not because she thinks it's a good idea, but because she doesn't know what else to do, and there is no other place to take him. Certain desolate thoughts have implanted themselves in the cells of her thinking and refuse to be unthought.

That's what happens to *people like James*. She has decided not to name the name since it causes in her so much anger and confusion. Since even saying *the thing that could happen to a person* put that person on one side or the other. A name could be a blade that sliced right through the blood, muscles, and mind of a person. She took the knife and she hacked straight down through James. What fell away to the floor of the ferry was deranged, hollow-eyed, soul-less. But what floated up and bumped against the low ceiling of the great slow-moving boat was good, clear-eyed, deeply intentioned. She saw what she had done. Worse than two Old Testament women splitting a child in two, she had carelessly done it herself.

A name could be a thing that created a person. Just as before she walks down to the ferry cafeteria and buys James a hot chocolate and muffin, she is just herself. But once she enters the line-up that wends its way through the cafeteria, she becomes *a customer*. The *name they had given James* is the thing she realizes she can no longer say. Who were they to say who he is? Doctors, administrators, psychologists, politicians. What does *a thing that you do* have to do with your name?

James slumps in his seat with his eyes closed, and Lily regards herself and then James. It's like an affliction, this way of seeing. The way she pits things against each other. Her practical, out-doors-y apparel. Shoes that ward off damp, expensive but practical pants, Gore-Tex coat. All these bought with the good proceeds of her job at the college, degrees from universities. Her accumulation of intention and discipline. Against James's beat-up skate shoes, pants that trail off his waist, exposing the top of his boxer shorts, and an over-size, cotton hoodie. Impractical. Damp. Shoddy. A uniform designed on the streets but one more apt for a California skate park than a Canadian West Coast in November. James silently resisting the *good* she'd earned him.

This is what she does. What parents do. They want for their children. Want being a combination of anxiety and desire: to come out the right way, sleep through the night. How she'd stood over him, watching for the rise and fall of his chest. To speak at the right time, appropriately, with the correct register. Get good grades, learn a sport, be fit, savvy, articulate. Was he breathing? Earn a decent amount, be the appropriate degree of conservative, liberal, sensitive, intelligent, land-owning, capable. Was the open mouth, slack and wet, a sign of life or of death? It was she who had demanded, she who had created one from the other—by desiring a good that depends on the subjection of what it is not for its existence, she had produced the forsaken.

*

Hot chocolate, warm and soothing. Muffin with blue berries exuding purple juice. Except that *the thing happening to James* helped to put things in the right perspective. Ask her any day of the week what she wants for James, and she will say, life. A heart that beats, hands that clench and unclench. Pores that exude tiny, oily beads of sweat. Hair, semen, digestive juice. She wants the cells of his body to speed along in their blue and red tubes, busily delivering oxygen to his grey and tightly packed brain.

Every time she calls him *that kind of person*, she feels less sure of whether she should write about him at all. He had *done something* she had not wanted him to do, and now he had a name. Is he not his own person, and does he not have a right to privacy? What about *the thing* makes him opportune for writing about? Is he a spectacle to describe in lurid detail, to narrate in nail-biting

chronology? What about Mrs. Ramsey? Mrs. Ramsey is dead. Is it for this reason that it is easier to write about her? Or is it because she died from the effects of cancer. A cancer that had grown in her body, starting in her lung and spreading via the lymph nodes to her brain. Near the end, calcium seeped out from her bones. Her hair grew sparse and luminous and stood up in a white puff above her head. Her eyes opened wide, and from a blue hospice bed, she quoted Yeats: *something, something, balloon of the mind...in the wind....*

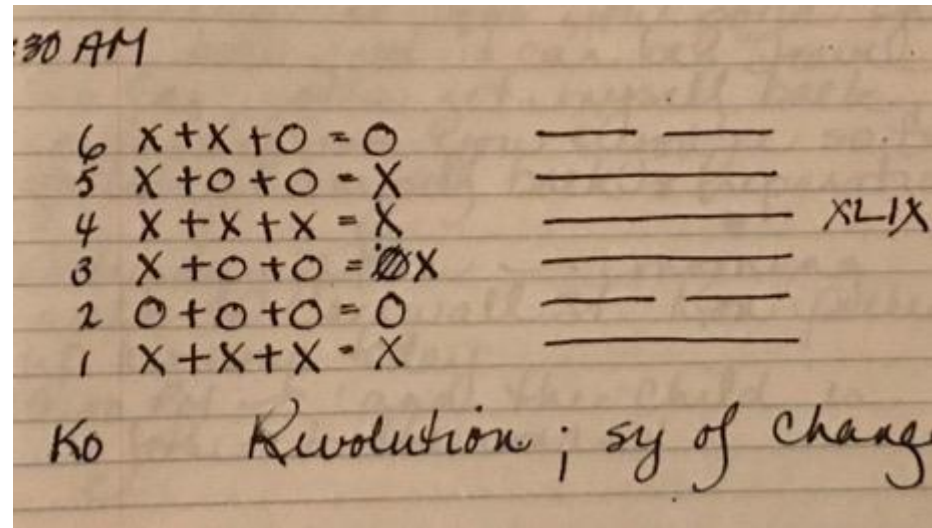
Cancer could be legitimate in a way the other *thing* was not. One you chose, the other simply happened to you. A young Mrs. Ramsey at the kitchen table with her legs crossed, the smoke from her cigarette purling into the air, the other hand engaged in meandering a lock of her hair, her eyes heavenward, far gone in thought. Her son who she loves. His hair, blondish and airy when he was a child, now grown thick and luxurious. The dark brown fringe that he has trained with an impulse of his fingers to lie across his forehead in a richly textured wave. Lily can remember when he was a teenager how he cut it in the bathroom with scissors. The thing that people did with the piece of tinfoil and lighter and inhaled through a glass tube. Or the red sores that James says are pimples but which she can see are places where he has been painstakingly picking at his skin. Driven by a logic to fulfill a certain order. A systematic rooting out—some virtue buried beneath the skin.

But there she goes focusing on the lurid again. She has to reel it back. The depiction that will surely evoke revulsion. She wants, urgently, to make it as neutral and legitimate as the blue hospice bed. Except that *thing* was not legitimate. It was not even legal. You could, just simply by doing it, become a person outside the law. Here on the inside are the abiders, protected, smug, cozy, and there outside the law, out in the street, flicking their lighters, attending to a lame buggy wheel, shaking out blue plastic tarpaulins, those who *do the thing*.

It *was* lurid. She had to admit that. But what to do about it? How to avoid using James as a spectacle? How to align herself with the lurid and not against it? She could start with herself. Leave off with describing James and focus on herself. Wasn't it true that she had found herself, in her early 40s, the mother of a teenager, in the fitting room at the tacky bra store in the mall, stripping off her tasteful black cotton underwear and stretchy bra and trying on the gawdiest, god-awful push-up bra and crack-dividing panties she could find, and then bringing them home and placing the discordantly colourful items in the dresser drawer for certain, delineated, secretive occasions. There she was slinking around like the Whore of Babylon while her son was downtown exchanging his paper route money for a small package of death. Perhaps though the worst of it had been that she had not kept such experiences secret but had gone and written about them, published even, aspects of that abject behaviour that a judicious woman would have kept to herself.

And hadn't she been on the wrong track most of her life? Had she not come from abject conditions? As if her life and the moments she lived—pooping in the school yard before Brownies, desperately digging into the gravel behind the tire swing and burying the brown turd in the damp sand (don't tell anyone, she'd begged Tammy G. I won't, she swore—and then she did). Ten-year old Lily standing in doorway to the kitchen amid a cloud of pot smoke and announcing in an imperious voice to Mrs. Ramsey and her shaggy-haired friends who were oblivious to her presence that *some people are trying to sleep*. The bike-riding concussion and stay in the hospital (which she enjoyed very much—the kindly people who gave her so much attention, and the beige oatmeal with brown sugar eaten in the clean blue bed). Seeing her father, Mr. Ramsey, crying in the bright morning light, drunk, regretful, selfishly maudlin—as if these all could be marked with a code and designated a side.

How she'd loved such binaries as a child: what was good was clean hair and Princess Di and a British accent and good girls who did not wear bright blue eye shadow. She'd had a babysitter in grade two—or was it two babysitters? Twins, one as bad as the other was good. The former, all sex and rock bands and tight, black clothing, had coloured the eyelids of Lily's baby doll with a blue magic marker, and the other, a homely girl, told Lily it was possible, if she wore certain glasses, to see the very face of God.



Or the very worst of all—that she'd kicked James out when he was eighteen. She'd been at wit's end with their endless arguments, his snubbing of her authority. His outrageous behavior—staying out late, sleeping all day, absences, outbursts. As their fights progressed, her sense of powerlessness grew. Her parenting was a speeding car she was driving—from the back seat.

What kind of mother kicks her child out is a question Lily regularly assails herself with. There it is now on the black water. She feels defensive about having kicked him out. Even the language of the term suggests something low-brow, dysfunctional. Something akin to her n'er-do-well background, her “dysfunctional upbringing.” The bad babysitter. *The thing* occurs to her now as a direct result of her kicking him out—a better parent would have seen his disruptive behavior as a *cry for help* and taken him cycling in Patagonia—would have spent time with him—not kicked him out. It's not that Lily hadn't thought about doing that—she had, but it's hard to keep

up a full-time job and live in a tent in Argentina. And then there'd been the reality that Mrs. Ramsey was sick, and there was no one to care for her but Lily. The lurid underwear in the dresser drawer and her flirtations flared up before her eyes as selfish preoccupation.

Black water with a greenish tinge, foamy in the ferry's wake. The good. It made Lily feel better to remind herself that she'd provided James with a deposit for the apartment and had been giving him a small living allowance while he'd been in school. She hadn't completely abandoned him. And it was a nice apartment that he shared with a few other young guys, in a good part of town. *Deposit. Apartment. School.* He'd begun taking upgrading courses at the college where she worked in the English department. *Work. English department.* Words that suggest she is going somewhere. Or that she came from somewhere. The destination being the part that is important. Make something of your self. Though, when she pins it down and regards its squirming body, she acknowledges that she both wants and rejects this future. Its insistence on an origin and a destination. An arche and a telos. Is this a shift in registers? Or can she have both? She wants all that is Work and English Department to be hers and strives to put things in a way that do not conflict with Mr. Ramsey crying in the morning light. There was something good and noble in his abjectness. A grown man laid bare with suffering in the early morning sunlight at a kitchen table. Crying for a lack that he understands only at the very end of a long drunk. The raw, bright place early in the morning. What had been frightening to her as a child she can now see with almost admiration. The Rice Crispy box flaring in sunlight. When sitting together with a student, how she endeavours to make good of their experience—framing whatever is low as pragmatic, whatever is negative as valuable. A career as a nail technician. Time in a federal penitentiary. An essay can be prepared like a cake. Gather, blend, bake, ice. In that order. Paragraph unity can be as simple and accessible as a sandwich—making sure to use the same type of bread on the top as the bottom. Their *I seen* as a legitimate alternative to *I saw*. Language is alive, she tells

them. Spelling can be queered, presenting to them historical proof in the gloriously aberrant orthography of Early Modern typesetters. Language literally had grass roots, and off she'd go describing the invention of grammar by the 19th century grammarians as an attempt to codify and control a living thing, illustrating the crucial difference between descriptive and prescriptive, but using plain language. She imagines that she can make honorific what culture in the name of education has deemed wrong, backward, abnormal. Mrs. Ramsey said *saw*. Mr. Ramsey, *seen*. Seen-saw. Two sides, joined together by a fork in a tree. And yet, too, had not Lily felt, when walking the polished hallways of James' school on parent-teacher night, the ghost of Mrs. Ramsey, in her flowing scarves and cowboy boots, her patchouli and tarot cards.

Her son is dying, and she wants to write about it. Scratch that. Her son is dying, and she wants to write about herself.

She consults the black water, in the distance, the furred green of an island. She wants to save James. She wants to save herself. At some point she would have to let him go. The way Mrs. Ramsey had gone. "Hands, do what you're bid." Bring Mrs. Ramsey's balloon of the mind, that "belies and drags in the wind / into its narrow shed."

*

Lily asks: you hungry?

She walks down to the cafeteria to buy him a hot chocolate and a muffin.

The fact that he has an appetite is a positive sign. It's not eating that you want to watch out for. Not that she knows this about *the thing*. It just seems intuitive to her. Like when he was little and woke up in the middle of the night with vomiting, and she'd help him to the toilet and clean his face, or bring him a basin and empty it. Cool cloths. Sips of water once he was able. A little toast later in the afternoon.

She stands in a line that wends its way from cafeteria and along the windowed wall of the ferry. Outside, the grey sky meets the black ocean; waves tipped with white crest and fall away. The ocean is deeper here, she realizes. She would get him something to eat.

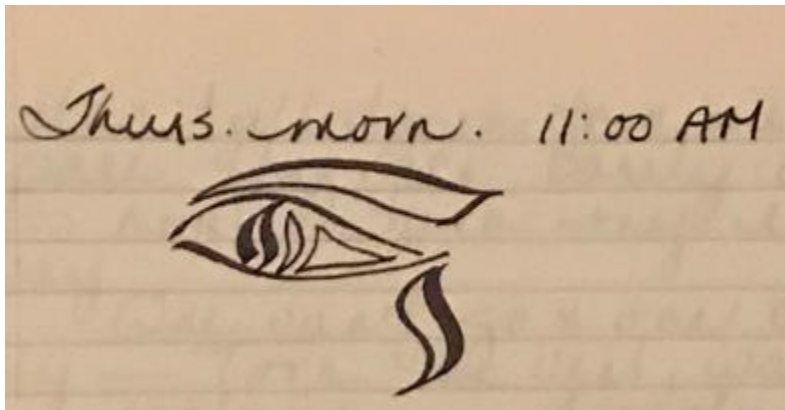
Lily starts to be hopeful. Maybe everything is going to be okay. Maybe this is even an ordinary road trip. Her mind plays the game that James is going to be all right. The clock will restart. The withered plant watered just before it dies of neglect. Wholesome food, clean clothes—and everything can begin anew—all she has to do is get away from the Island, far from downtown, the people who do *the thing* and their lighters huddled up against buildings out of the rain; just last week as she'd walked back to her car along Pandora Street, a young man, James's age, face picked raw, shoeless, arms outstretched, mouth agape, turning in a slow gyre.

*

She would write about it, she could write about it, if she adhered to a set of principles. The ferry cafeteria offers two sorts of muffins enclosed in plastic packaging. Chocolate chip and blueberry. Neither look very nutritious, but she knows James needs, above all, calories. She can see that he has been starving himself. *The thing* that caused him to not eat for several days. Four or five days, he

admitted to her when she asked. The sticky sweet muffin will do. She presses the button on the machine that prepares the hot chocolate, conscious of the way she stands, and watches the steaming liquid fill the disposable cup. Other ferry-goers drift about, scrutinizing the cafeteria's offerings, and Lily's consciousness moves with them. The important thing will be to remain faithful to James. Above all to protect him. But how can she do that?

Ahead of her, a father and a toddler navigate through the ambling ferry-goers, with the ferry pitching side to side, and Lily notices how casually the father directs the toddler's motions—the toddler pulls on his father's hand, murmuring to himself and gesturing to the red and green Jell-O and the brown and red cakes—yet the father persists in steering him, not by domineering him with orders,



but leaning with his body weight, a silent insistence against the swaying toddler, with his hand around the child's hand, so that the separate two of them move in tandem with their packaged sandwiches toward the till.

O, blemish. O, sebum, O, blackhead lodged within the sphere of the pore.

O, sullen answers and towels on the bathroom floor. O, failed math tests and skipped swim lessons. O, bowls in the bedroom and rolled eyes and too much screen time.

*

She walks back from the cafeteria, muffin in one hand, hot chocolate in the other, with no hand therefore to pluck the string of her underwear out of the crack of her ass. If she wasn't such a bad babysitter, perhaps none of this would have happened. Walk, walk, wiggle. She shifts her butt cheek in an attempt to dislodge the string.

She thought she had been protecting him. There she'd been in her discordantly coloured underwear at the Bad Babysitter meeting. She too had once done *the thing*. But many years ago. James had never even seen her doing it. He had sat at the back of many a Bad Babysitter support meeting doing his homework, and she'd dragged him along to Bad Babysitter Picnics and Bad Babysitter Bowling and Bad Babysitter Talent Night. They skied x-country on gear she bought at the thrift shop, she read him novels, and they walked along the ocean. She drove out to the country and they cut down their own spindly Christmas trees. They made homemade play dough with flour and salt and food colouring, and he progressed through swim lessons—Starfish, Angel Fish, River Otter, Dolphin—to his Bronze Star.

Walk, walk, wiggle.

In her mind which opened out like a backgammon board, divided down the middle, he would be a lifeguard. He would be an intellectual. He would hike and ski and sail. And go to college! But when he went sailing one time with his grade 9 class, he hated it. Ski trips organized by the school were expensive, and Lily associated those gear-boxes on the roofs of cars with a lifestyle of easy adventure and privilege. He read books, but enjoyed *Garfield* on par with *Calvin and Hobbes*. At least she had not given into the demands for cable TV, but when the Internet came, all that went out the window with *Family Guy*, *Robot Chicken*, and *Trailer Park*

Boys, shows whose crassness she deplored, and yet she could see what James saw in them—the lowbrow irony, the mocking of the middle classes.

As if she wasn't all at moments dressed up like the bad babysitter. Oh, James had called her bluff alright.

Walk, walk, wiggle.

Cover her face. She can feel it there, hot and pulsing. She shifts the baggy with the muffin into the hand with the hot chocolate, and then, bringing her hand to her forehead, palpates.

It's like she's going in reverse, with each step she takes, she moves closer to where she was before. Now, she approaches their seat, and she sees James where she left him. His eyes are closed.

It was she who was being mocked, she and her secret underwear, her precarious status in an intellectual middle class to which she had only recently become a member. A status that was anyway perpetually threatened by her own ignominious past— high school dropout, single mother, person who does *the thing*.

She can feel the bad babysitter rising on her forehead like boil, a horn, a protruding third eye. The head of her department lived two doors up from Lily and James. This woman and her husband and their private-school attending kids and their charming heritage house. Lily rented a rambling knockdown. Doubtless the woman had seen some of the goings-on two doors down. Kids in dark hoodies slinking up the street. The day of the-three-cop-cars. Lily taking sick days from work. The whole *wholesome* sensibility was a thing that she put on. Like lipstick on a pig.

Hot and painful, pulsing with her heartbeat. A vision of her child self at a kitchen table, the dishes are piled in the sink, or the dishes are smashed on the floor, someone is lighting a joint, Lynyrd Skynyrd on the turntable. Or it was Joan Armatrading on the turntable, and the windows are wide open, wind fresh off the lake, Mrs. Ramsey in the doorway smoking a cigarette. Because, of course, it was like this.

Walk, walk, wiggle.

What was normal and good in her own particular life didn't have a distinct name or image. She didn't know what it was. Protecting James meant procuring for him a life that wasn't actually hers.

She hadn't seen herself in the books she read or the TV programs she watched. Not on *The Waltons* or *The Brady Bunch*; not in *The Little House on the Prairie* or *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. Not in those stalwart and principled fathers and gentle and forbearing mothers. She had not seen Mrs. Ramsey in her chair, pouring over her esoteric texts, using I'd-Rather-Be-Dancing to kill a spider, or merely smoking and staring off into space; there was no Mr. Ramsey crying at the breakfast table, and nowhere could be found Lily and her two brothers, riding their bikes out beyond the city in the waving green corn.

*

It's 10:52 on a school night, and she's striding down the carpeted stairs in her nightgown. Pot smoke wafts from the kitchen, where can be heard raucous voices and laughter. Someone plays the same three chords of Neil Young's "Old Man" over and over. She's

been lying in bed in her bedroom, furious. She's been shoving towels under the crack of her bedroom door to keep the pot smoke from getting into her bedroom. And now, at the doorway to the kitchen, she stands imperious, in judgment of Mrs. Ramsey, who does not even see her.

She is five years-old. Her brother and she are sent down to the basement, told to stay there. Upstairs, they hear a clatter of voices—Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey—and then the sound of the police. The porch light is on at Lily's grandparent's house.

She is ten years old. Lily has wrangled to have herself invited over after school to hang out at one of her friend's houses, lingering in her "Den" to eat as many graham crackers as she can while they watch *Three's Company* on Cable TV. Lily can smell meatloaf cooking. But here comes the girl's mother from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a tea towel and pointing at the clock. It's time for Lily to go home.

She walks home up Bridgeport Street until there are no more streetlights. They live in a two-bedroom townhouse near an off ramp of the highway. Lily has her own room upstairs, and her brothers share the second bedroom. The living room downstairs is both living room and Mrs. Ramsey's bedroom, and her bed is both her bed and the couch.

When Lily's fourteen, they'll live in a house in the bush that has a bathtub in the kitchen. When she has a bath, everyone gets kicked out of the kitchen, and she fills the tub right to the top with hot water. On a stool beside the tub, a lit candle.

She is ten. Mrs. Ramsey works as a waitress in a restaurant. She is thirteen; she works in a garden centre. She is seven; she is on Mother's Allowance, which is what they called welfare for single mothers back then.

Lily gets herself ready for school. Will there be milk for the cereal? And if there is milk, will there be cereal?

Lily stands in the check-out line at the grocery store. She's inventing a reason to go and stand by the front door of the store so as to be spared the scene when Mrs. Ramsey doesn't have enough money to cover the bill—too hot, too cold, a stomach ache—but Mrs. Ramsey won't let her go. The girl behind the till subtracts the items Mrs. Ramsey takes back out of the paper bags, and Lily looks fixedly at the names of gum she is not allowed to have: Hubba Bubba, Bubble Yum, Black Bart, Big Red.

Mrs. Ramsey "bounces" cheques—which seems to be a purposely funny way of describing the envelopes that arrive from the bank containing cheques stamped NSF in red.

Lily is nine and then she's ten. More than once she comes home from school and the phone is cut off. No one is home. One time they have no electricity for two days.

Mrs. Ramsey's friend Minta comes over. "Crazy Minta." She and Mrs. Ramsey are going out—they are wearing berets and cowboy boots. Lipstick and patchouli. Minta has given Mrs. Ramsey a birthday present—a broom, and on the handle, she has carved, "I'd Rather Be Dancing." In the kitchen, Lily and her brother fight over washing the dishes, which have been accumulating on the counter all day: cereal bowls and coffee cups and ashtrays and frying pans, and the supper plates and glasses and knives and forks. They are on their own tonight. Lily is ten, and she is the babysitter for her eight and four year-old brothers.

Sometimes, when Lily does something wrong—like talk back (she thinks she's a smartass, doesn't she?), Mrs. Ramsey grabs the flip flop from her very foot and throws it across the room at Lily. If she can reach her, it's the wooden spoon.

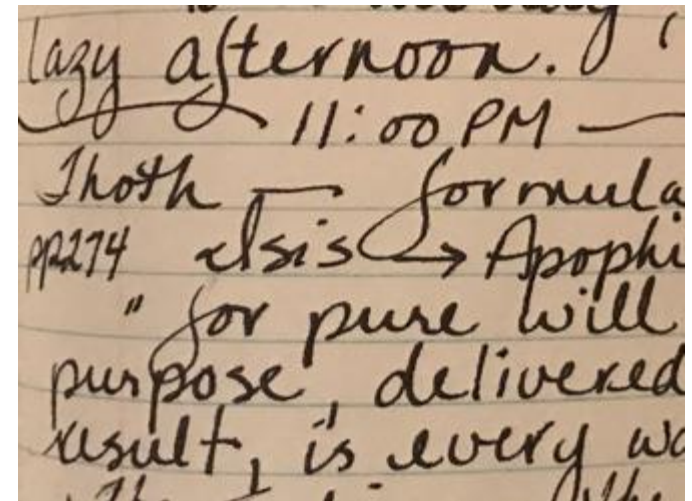
Lily is allowed to read any book on her mother's book shelf. At age ten, she finds a copy of Joan Crawford's biography *Mommy Dearest* beside Colette's *Evening Star*. Joan's mother forces her to her knees on the bathroom tiles, and Joan must scrub the bathroom with Comet until her hands burn. Joan's mother gets drunk. Joan's mother hits her. Lily leaves the book open on the kitchen table to show Mrs. Ramsey she is reading it. But nothing happens. So, she goes outside and rides her bike. One time, Lily and her brothers ride their bikes out beyond the city limits, until there are only cornfields, miles and miles of waving green corn, and when they get home hours later, famished and thirsty, they aren't even in trouble. No one realizes they've been gone.

Lily finds six tiny pot plants in the tomatoes. She pinches their delicate green heads between the nail of her thumb and finger, causing them to topple over.

Mrs. Ramsey allows Lily to cast her I Ching pebbles—marked X on one side, and O on the other—which she keeps in a small, navy-blue leather satchel. But she won't interpret the reading for Lily, which is a story about a flowing stream, a questioning pupil, and an annoyed teacher. She shows Lily the hexagram—a series of solid and broken lines—in a yellowed paperback. Mrs. Ramsey tells Lily to read the story for herself. Divination is not for the profane and the uninitiated.

When Lily is fourteen, they abandon the rotting Victorian mansion downtown Kitchener that Mrs. Ramsey is running like a rooming house, the band that practices

in the basement, the frightening nighttime altercations with Mrs. Ramsey's bearded boyfriend, and move up north to the shore of Lake



Huron, a farmhouse on the side of the highway with a quarter acre of garden. A yellow school bus pulls up to a snow bank and takes Lily with her black clothes and her novels and her pouch of Drum tobacco to a small-town high school.

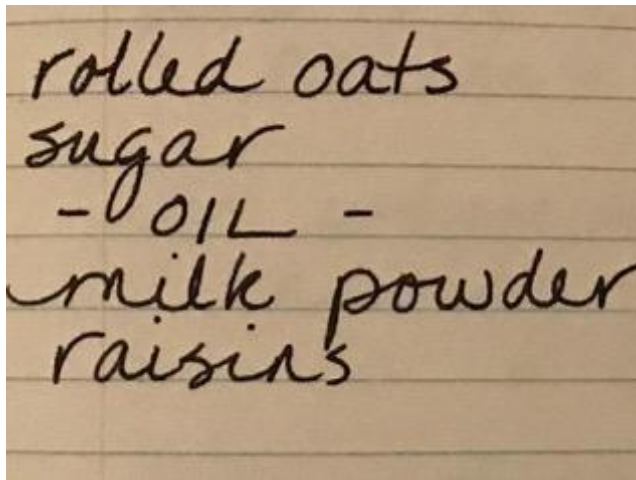
Lily is ten. She sits on her mother's bed in the living room and peels the candlewax from an encrusted Black Tower wine bottle in which a single white candle burns. Mrs. Ramsey is in the kitchen cooking creamed salmon in vol-aux-vent pastries, or chicken cacciatore, or maybe just fish sticks and oven fries. Behind Lily on a shelf, there is a turntable and a milk crate of albums that they are allowed to play. She carefully selects an album, allows it to fall out of the cardboard sleeve into her waiting hand, holding it by the sides with her open palms as she has been taught—Cat Steven's *Tea for the Tillerman*—and places it on the turntable. Lily loves the album cover with its cartoon children, the gnomish man and the teapot. She pushes the switch and watches the weighted arm swing up and out, drop smartly onto the black vinyl. *It is a wild world*, she muses to herself. She can see her reflection in the sliding glass door. The flickering light of the candle. She thinks she looks pretty beside the Boston fern in the antique stand that was her great grandmother's, the peacock feathers in the earthenware vase.

But mostly there is difficulty, rejection, impatience. Mrs. Ramsey always seems involved in something just beyond. She sits at the table with her legs crossed, the smoke from her cigarette purling into the air, the other hand engaged in meandering a lock of her hair, her eyes heavenward, far gone in thought. It's impossible to wake her from her dream—Lily knows, she's tried. *Mom, mom, mom*, she and her brothers chant, to see if she can be brought back to life.

Their life. A small assemblage of four—Mrs. Ramsey (sometimes the errant K pulls up the gravel driveway in his old, blue Volvo), Lily and her two younger brothers.

But it seems to Lily even then that she and her brothers are merely a temporary, transient concern for Mrs. Ramsey, and that she would someday join her rightful place among an elite school of self-taught spiritualists and intellectuals. Madame Blavatsky, Aleister Crowley, Lady Gregory, assembled on the back patio beneath the wisteria, stirring coffee and smoking joints.

*



I'm sorry, mom, James says. He has crumbs of muffin down the front of his hoodie.

*

At least she's bought him something to eat.

Perhaps it was her fault. She had not said *no* enough, or in the right way. A lack of healthy boundaries, the literature described it.

Or, she'd said *no* too much. There was a school that professed this, too.

She could spiral down the list. She was impatient, focused on her own needs rather than his. She went to school, had lovers, needed time alone, demanded time alone, though as a single parent she hardly ever got any. She thinks back to the hundreds of times where she lost her patience. There James is, five years-old, and there she is, wild and ragged with frustration, threatening that he'd have to go and live with his dad if he didn't go to bed.

Or perhaps it was, and still is, a tendency to fall into self-absorption. Isn't it true that as they speak, as she reaches out to brush away the yellow crumbs, as they make their way across the black water, as they escape the Island, as they sail away from certain death— isn't it true that she is narrating all this? That such experiences present themselves to her as words on a page, as a story to recount, as hers?

O, shame. O, remorse. O, sick desire to be noticed.

The blue eye shadow of the bad babysitter. Mr. Ramsey feeling sorry for himself.

She dives into it now, removing her hand from the pustule on her forehead. She stands, as if to stretch her back, but clandestinely takes a glance at a spot of roiling foam on the black water.

Good thing she's wearing her underwear. She uses one hand to pull the string out of the crack of her ass; with the other, she takes off her glasses and places them on the back of her seat. She's got her eye on that roiling spot, and now she aims her body at it, through her eyes, creating a tunnel, a portal, so that she's diving arms first, then her shoulders, tucked head, rigid core, right into the

centre of the spot. She thinks it should feel cold, but it does not. In fact, it's warm like skin. Slightly hot and clammy. Some tension at the surface where sebum blocks the hole, but soon she's through that, gliding in the viscosity.

*

He's sorry. She's sorry.

They are coming into the green swirling water of Active Pass. She can peer out the window of the ferry and see, on the right side, water lapping at the shore of Mayne Island, almost within reach of the boat, and on the left, only two hundred meters beyond, the sheer cliff face of Galiano Island.

Look, it's our spot, Lily says to James. Who opens his eyes at her voice.

Ya, he says, tiredly. A glimmer of a smile.

Lily looks at a spot high up on the cliff face, where she and James had hiked only a few summers previous. She tries to spot the tree where they sat and ate sandwiches, and where they looked down into the impossibly blue water. Summer and the sun hot on their faces. Look, there's the ferry, he had said. And it had taken them several minutes to orient themselves, to see that they were looking down upon the place where they are now.

*

She would take him from the Island. She had packed up her many eyeshadows that morning and thrown them all in the car. And some yogurt and canned peaches and a hunk of cheese and a loaf of bread. And finally, James. Yes, James. She had managed to get James in the car. If they could only get off the Island. It seemed to her the epicentre of all peril. Each day in the news, more deaths. A toxic drug supply. They called it an epidemic. A crisis. But Lily was quite sure no one—no one not involved anyway—cared. No one cared. Because those who died, those who were dying—*did that thing*. And that in itself explained and resolved everything.

You did it to yourself. So, *a thing that was done with one's own hand* was a death sentence. If you took your hand and your hand did a thing, you could be left on the bathroom floor of a 7-Eleven, your breath coming short, shallow, not at all. Beyond Naloxone, far beyond CPR. The certain thoughts that refuse to be unthought.

*

James's dad, Carmichael. That's where Lily is taking James.

*

She is taking James to Carmichael because what else is she supposed to do?

In thinking this, she stands, places her glasses on the back of the seat, stretches her back. James forever with his eyes closed. I'm going to the washroom, she says to James, who nods in her direction.

She puts her glasses back on, and reaching behind her, grasps the backstrap of the bra where it has ridden up her back and pulls it down. She glances to her chest and sees the gangly onions of her breasts half out of the cups, or rather, the cups ridden up above her breasts, and then pulls the front down so that they sit, pale and lank, in their rigid, iridescent cups. She looks around the ferry. No one seems to have noticed. At least she's wearing sensible shoes, she thinks, as she makes her way toward the bathroom. The ferry tilts first to port, and then to starboard, and Lily sashays a bit, enjoying the motion of the great lumbering ferry on the black water.

As she's walking to the bathroom, her phone pings. She glances down. It's a message from Mrs. Ramsey. She can tell right away from the graceful look of the letters. She puts her face to her phone and sniffs. From the message comes an odour of cigarettes, pot, something once living, like flowers. Lily stands to the side of the boat, leaning against a window, so that she can read the message.

Lily smiles. As she strides toward the bathroom, she places the phone into one of the spacious cups of her bra. There is no one in the bathroom, so she feels comfortable to sit on the bowl for a bit. It strikes her funny that even in these moments of disaster some things still feel good. Peeing. Such a simple joy. The warm liquid pouring out of her body—a peculiar, tickling, emptying-out sensation. And then it comes. A buzz in her head when she closes her eyes. Hot tears. She allows it: *she feels sorry for herself*. Perhaps nothing worse had ever happened. Could happen. Peristaltic waves, contractions of an ancient organ, signals blinking long and slow. Oh!

And then, like a tap, she shuts it off.

Sniffs, wipes, flushes.

Wednesday, Oct. 3rd, 1984 2:00 PM
Another notebook
Autumn showing her colours.
Already October Thanksgiving
this weekend, thinking of going
to the Bend.
Mailed a letter to B.C. yesterday. Waiting for a reply. Still
have to face the music at the
Walper & get my cheque. A stupid
thing to do. Afflicted with a
cold. Guess I should cut back
on the cigarettes for awhile.
How to explain the to Doug
my behaviour — abject humil-
ity? How private a person I
have (have I?) become.
9:00 PM — I notice the
days grow shorter, dusk falls
earlier. They say my candle
burns at both ends.
it will not last the night
but Ah, my foes
& Oh, my friends
It gives a lovely light!

How pretty the early evening, so clear, a beautiful sunset, a hint of frost in the air.
Musing... magicians & madmen & wild women & witches makes me smile to see the pictures grow & become clearer yet more diverse. Ron says he's on the G.R. this weekend. I miss my studying but still want to spend every minute I can with Ron, so that's been put aside for the last few days. I think of Δ ; how close how solitary, how exclusive. I can't get more done this week. Playing of observer; some detachment too drained this afternoon conversation. I see the attainment; how in & of grasping, holding, is the words become tedious. I another cigarette & curse things; contradiction, $\frac{1}{2}$ n

When she stands, she snatches up the panties, rolling the flimsy fabric up her thighs and placing the single thread into the best possible place in the crack of her ass. If she positions it just so, she finds she can tolerate the thing. It does feel liberating to feel the cheeks of her ass free from fabric, unencumbered, as it were. But she does resent the string.

Saturday Nov 3rd /84 10:AM
Tear another page from the calendar. Full moon on Thurs (8th)
Wake up & have coffee & joints with Kevin. Music - that's all I got to say - Baby's worried - acid last night - went out visiting - these 4 walls that surround me - some 'lightning flashes' (clairvoyance - clear vision?) Gifts, a sweater & beads & a good book, a loaf of bread, a jug of wine, & there beside me singing in the wilderness. * Reminds me * Tears - out slows the sadness & wild grief, washes the wounds

*

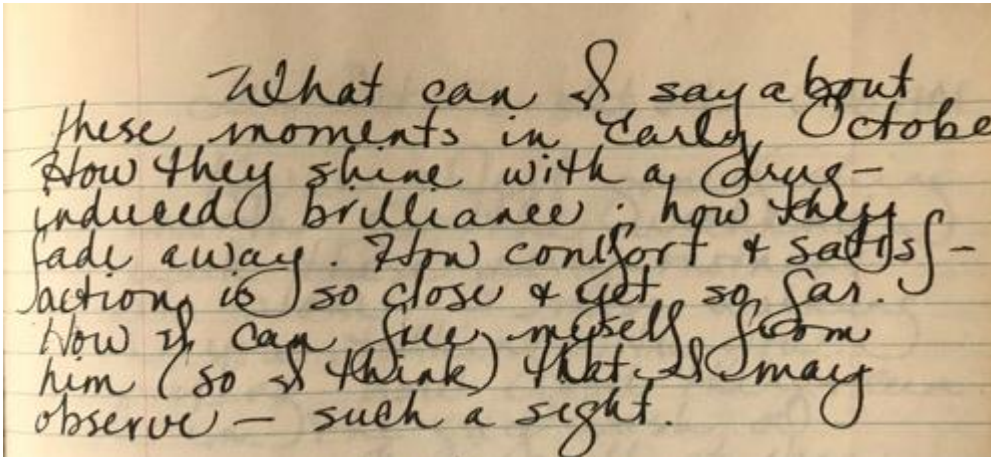
James' dad Carmichael. Who she thinks of like an eon, an eternity, an ancient historical object. A time and a place. James' dad's cabin on the side of a mountain in a valley with a river running down the middle of it. A fault divides the Valhallas to the west, gneiss formed 20km below the earth's crust, from the plate to the east, sandstone and shale, laid down in a shallow ancient ocean. When the sun sets in the west, it's the Valhallas it sinks behind, and it's the edge of uplifted ancient ocean that is lit up in the amber light of the setting sun. Down at the midpoint, winding and dividing the valley bottom with its serpentine inclination, the clear green water of the Slocan River, flowing out of Slocan Lake in the north. All winter the snows accumulate in the high mountains, and in spring, water blazes down the mountain sides, tearing away at the land and carving new paths here, widening old stream beds there, slowly gridding down the surface of the fine-grained gneiss, and with greater rapidity, the softer shale and sandstone of the east. Summer, winter, fall, spring. The sun in the sky, the green on the land. Crevices form in the rock, insinuating divisions where there were none before. Leaf litter forming the forest floor. It goes on this way for a few million years. Maybe ten, twenty. Make it forty. A family of Sinixt people—mom, dad, babe and auntie—propel their sturgeon-nosed canoe up the lake one last time, the v shape in the green water dividing the past from the future, and then James' dad's cabin appears on the side of the mountain. Boards cut from fir frame the small two-room house. A few square windows with small, square panes of glass. And newspapers laid between the cedar siding and the plaster and lathe. The Canadian government hauls Japanese-Canadian families from their homes on the coast. Three families in two rooms. Wet snow, a tiny coal burning stove. Many years later, the whole cabin is picked up with a crane and put on a flatbed, delivered to a side of the mountain 30km down the valley. A room for a toilet, tub, and sink framed in, a basement dug, and a furnace installed. Over the

years, people move out and in. A new electric panel is added, and the furnace changed over to gas. The pear tree planted in the yard blooms, blossoms, grows heavy with yellow pears, which attract wasps when they're picked, though usually fall to the ground. Bears arrive, gorge themselves, and go home. Year after year they tear at the lower branches, so that the tree grows both upward and in an eccentric manner. The rain will, and then the snow, covering the house, crushing the tree. In summer, grasshoppers hop. The sun. Some of those who live in the house have children, but most not. A series of chairs stands in front of a window that looks out at the pear tree, which has gained a companion: a washing machine. Several revolutions of the earth around the sun, and the duo are joined by a green 1961 Ford F100. Hip-high grass and ferns that would swallow a man. Summer spring. One autumn, kids open the washer and fill it with pears. In 1983, a particularly raucous summer storm blows the lid shut. All through the latter half the century, the house goes on being placidly lived in, with nothing exceptional save for a chimney fire one cold January morning, after which the then-owner removes the wood burning stove and boards the chimney shut. The furnace chugs along for a few more years. The new owner dies, and the estate is settled, as such things are wont to do. New owners fail to replace the furnace when it goes, and instead plug in a number of portable heaters, which often mean the fuses blow. A boon is when the basement is converted, the walls lined with poly, and powerful fans installed. Power heisted from the pole, 1000kw bulbs hung, and crops had. Up above, people go and come. The dirty glass in the windows is cold, and fern shapes of frost grow up the glass. Every once in a while, the sound of a faraway car on the highway. In the first room, a mound of blankets and quilts, under which a human form. (The sepulcher of the king). The old wooden floor is uneven and strewn with clothes. A bedsheet covers the doorway. In the second room, exhausted by a century of expectations, the kitchen floor

gives in to a hole covered with a board, and a counter sloppy with dishes looks on passively at a stove scattered with mouse turds. A massive black garbage bag yawns open, spilling bottles and cans onto the floor.

*

It's 10:52 on a school night. Lily wraps her coat around her bare legs and ducks into the car. She drives herself to a location she has looked up on Google Maps. It is dark, and many houses have Christmas lights.



As she turns down the prescribed street, she tugs down the employee parking permit from her mirror, puts it in the glove box, and parks.

She's twenty-five, she's got her hands on her thighs and she's leaning over the bowl. Twenty-seven, twenty-eight. One hand on the wall and the other on the rim of the bowl.

But the ecstasy, that was something else. Like fabric unfurled, a fur muff, all night waiting in a sensuous station for a slow train. And then one time at a party, blue tablets if she remembers correctly. Her open palm. She was wearing a fur coat and a shirt that revealed her midriff. Men's trousers, a top hat. The hand that dropped the tablets, and then after that, only a series of fantastic images. A lemon falling from the counter—they stood in the kitchen,

as such parties went—and as it fell, sparks blazed from it. It was a wondrous awakening, followed by a series of exquisitely logical pronouncements that dictated that they must depart the warm house and head into the street. It was snowing, big fat, tremulous flakes, falling from a tumult of blackness, and she'd been in such profound wonder that she and the people she was with—they were insensible of any other act than to lie down in the middle of the street, spread-eagle in that deep, never-trod snow.

She's twenty-four, thirty-five, thirty-seven, forty. Empty and falling and timeless. Head back with the neck bent at an angle, half on and half off the bed, or her legs at a strange juncture. Watch now the heart slow, the hand draw forth a string of saliva. The tongue going of its own mind. A slick feeling of control. Some physicality rendered abstract and wormlike, amphibian, space-person action, diving and doing flips on the zero-gravity promenade of the moon.

A parsimonious grub fattened on her attention. At the other end, a pair of eyes, blinking and gulping. Going enormous, her hand at her own mouth. Out-timed, timed out. Laid flat and off. A kind of fatigue that comes only after an enormously solemn pleasure or bawling crying.

She's forty-four, crying and running. She has decided—if James doesn't make it, she can kill herself. That ever since Mrs. Ramsey died, ever since James had begun doing *the thing*, she'd been sitting in her attic suite listening to the same song on auto-repeat for months on end, turning over Tarot cards and crying. That she'd let practically everything go: the garden, the house, her job. Or rather, she did these things, but they didn't mean anything. That most of the time she focused on simply not thinking about James dying.

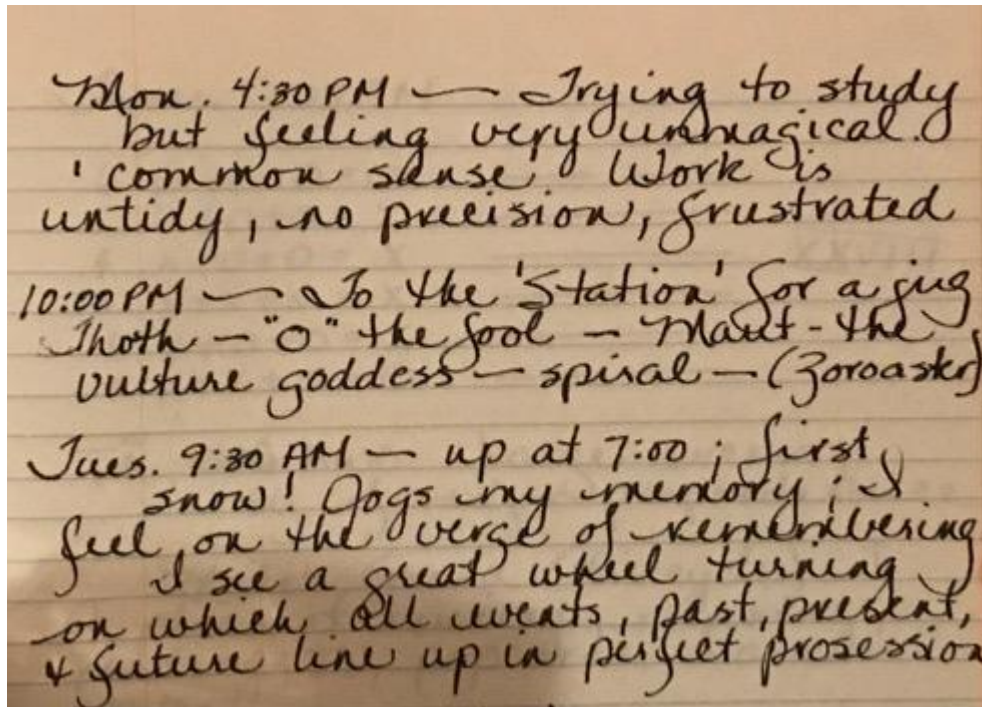
She thought thinking about it could increase its chance of happening. So, she'd listen to the same song for several hours, or run 20 kilometers, anything to create a painful sort of hypnotic sensation.

She's forty-eight, and she's trying to write about what has happened. Type, delete, type, delete. She strikes through a whole section about cock-sucking. The part about driving in the night. How could she write about that

א	Aleph	· Δ	· Ox (Plough)	· 1	· 11
ב	Beth	· ♀	· House	· 2	· 12
ג	Gimel	· ☾	· Camel	· 3	· 13
ד	Daleth	· ♀	· Door	· 4	· 14
ה	Haddi	· ⚡	· Fish-hook	· 90,900	· 28 *
ו	Vau	· ♂	· Nail	· 6	· 16
ז	Zain	· II	· Sword	· 7	· 17
ח	Cheth	· ⊗	· Fence	· 8	· 18
ט	Lamed	· ≡	· Ox-Goad	· 30	· 22
י	Yod	· ♀	· Hand	· 10	· 20
כ	Kaph	· 4	· Palm	· 20,500	· 21
ל	Leth	· Ω	· Serpent	· 9	· 19
מ	Meme	· ∇	· Water	· 40,600	· 23
נ	Nun	· ♀	· Fish	· 50,700	· 24
ס	Samekh	· ♂	· Prop	· 60	· 25
ע	A'in	· ♀	· Eye	· 70	· 26
פ	Pe	· ♂	· Mouth	· 80,800 *	· 27
צ	Ze	· ♀	· Window	· 5	· 15 *
ק	Qoph	· ♂	· Back of Head	· 100	· 29
ר	Resh	· ⊙	· Head	· 200	· 30
ש	Shin	· (h) Δ	· Tooth	· 300	· 31
ת	Tau	· ↓	· Tau (Coptic)	· 400	· 32

and not be held responsible? It was like a simulacrum of a simulacrum. Writing about not writing. What did any of this have to do with James?

She's running, thirty-nine, forty-two, forty-eight, running. It's February, a weak winter sun. The lake slides by, flashes of blue through Douglas Fir, she takes her mittened hand and wipes away a drip of snot from her nose. 12k, 17k, 23k, thoughts crest and recede, her heart beats, a resolute sense of longing. Geese low on the water touch down and honk out the spirit of the law: he would die, she would die, they would die. Bright and flashing.



*

She stands the mirror in the bathroom of the ferry applying and re-applying her eyeshadow. She can't not put it on and she can't take it off. Such were things.

Because *James* did *the thing*, there was a nefariously Byzantine system for obtaining help or assistance. There were the phone numbers and the webpages one could pursue. She

had started with the free programs. She made calls. Lots of them, looking for someone to help, a hotline, a support group, or a government agency. On her lunch at work, with her phone, standing at the back of the building near the photocopier. Because she does not have her own office. Or outside if it wasn't raining. With her phone in her hand, and a pen, a pad of paper to record the important details. Outside in the wind, in a doorway, avoiding the oncoming faces of students and faculty. Because, of course, the hours that public health programs answer their phones are the same hours that she worked. *Hello? I'm looking for some help for my son. He's nineteen. Yes, I'll hold.* The call to one agency to receive a phone number for another agency (someone's using the copy machine; walk down the hall past the Math department while talking); make that call and receive a busy signal or an answering machine, or even to receive an appointment some time two weeks from then. *Yes, I know he needs to make the call himself.* Or actually to go to one of these agencies and receive a brochure, a pamphlet, a leaflet, for a website, with a phone number, 9-4, M-F. But it's the weekend. Or it's nighttime. *Yes, I know he needs to want to quit doing the thing. Yes. Yes.* And anyway, all one could do is receive another phone number, for another agency. Or a website, with a number to call to make an intake appointment. Or the actual intake appointment, finally, weeks from then.

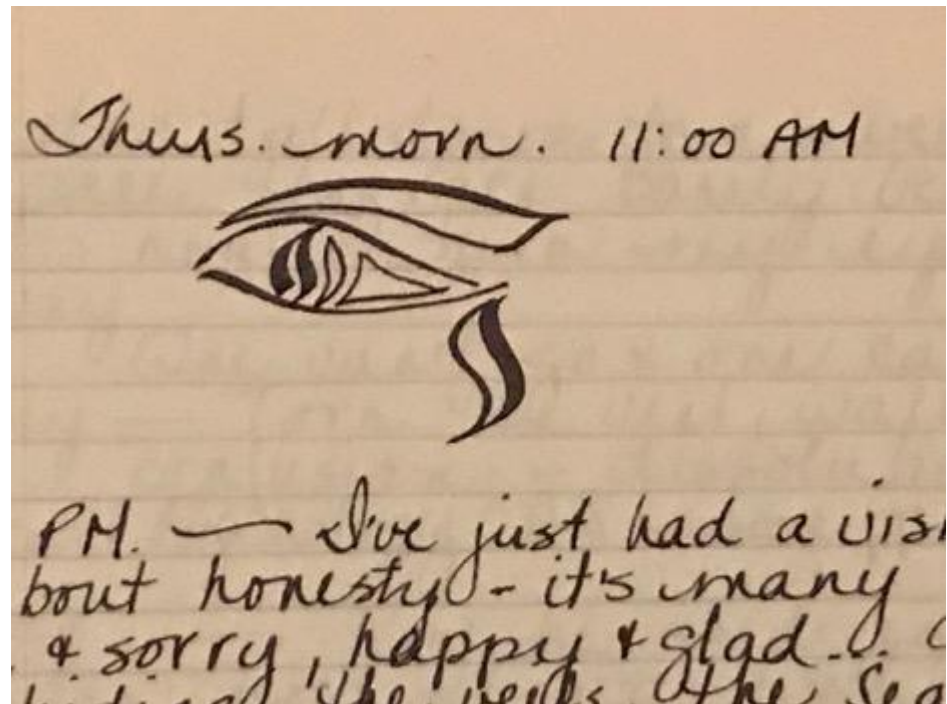
She places her hand on her forehead, flattening her fringe back, peering in the glass for the massive pustule that she had felt earlier, but what strikes her is her own image. She catches herself looking, and in that moment, likes what she sees. She allows the fringe of her hair to fall down on her forehead naturally. She sees the pink of her cheeks and reflects that she still has the look of youth. She stands back, turns sideways, and admires the mostly flat curve of her belly. The panties make small indent in the flesh of her hip, but it

is not unpleasing. And at a certain angle, even the cumbersome, colourful bra looks okay. The ensemble, she thinks, visually lengthens her body, stretching it so that the lumps of her breasts ride high on her chest, dignified, up near her shoulders, visually narrowing her waist, which leads to a kind of crescendo at the panties. She cranes her neck to take in the full effect of this way of seeing herself. At any rate, she looks healthy. Her body looks lean and capable.

She is the good mother. Strong, encouraging health and vigor in her offspring. But as she turns, she catches a glimpse of her face and sees that she is holding mouth oddly. Her lips are pursed—like she is expecting a kiss—a tension that pulls up the corners of her mouth—a tension that when released, allows her face to fall into an ugly frown. James had often remarked to her that she has a mirror-face, a specific face she puts on when she looks at herself in the mirror, and this had struck her in a deep way. Is it possible she keeps one reflection for herself and shows another to the world? Once, too, when he was very small, he told her of nightmare he'd had. In it, she was a witch with alphabet letters for teeth.

Her phone pings.

Or maybe the messages come from below, down in the dark water. Below the boat. Lily never really never knows



where the past is. Wherever it is, it strikes her as painful. She can have Mrs. Ramsey's messages, the yearning and fruitfulness of her language, the scent of the paper. But she can't have Mrs. Ramsey. If she examines the message closely, she can see where the ink bleeds into the fibers of the paper.

Then there were the private centres, the ones with soothing, nature-inspired names that she couldn't afford: Cedars, Edgewood, The Orchard, Pacifica: and their rates: \$225 per day; meal plans, ground transportation, assessment fees; \$40 000 for a longer, more success-driven 10-week program; aftercare, psycho-social training, yoga sessions, optional art therapy modules; ongoing pay-as-you-go relapse prevention.

And finally, the peer-run programs—12 Step. But you had to want to go.

And anyway, James had said he would not. So.

*

So, Lily had asked. What about help for me? As a mom.

Oh yes, a voice on the phone had said. We have that.

When does it begin? asked Lily.

Next spring, May or April. Said the voice with complete equanimity.

And that's when Lily felt she might lose control. It was November. James might be dead by the spring. She hung up the phone in the most violent way that she could muster, which really only meant jabbing at the little red phone icon with her finger. But she did it viciously.

*

Is she abandoning or saving him? An announcement sounds over the loudspeaker. The ship's whistle will sound, and then it does, and they see themselves mirrored in the West-ward ferry that glides past them.

She had sought out help. There was the 12-step peer support group that took place in a church basement in Oak Bay. For parents of kids who do *the thing*. The woman organizing the meeting had required that Lily sit in a certain chair, and then, it came out that new people weren't permitted to share their stories. They could only listen. Lily listened. Round the room, beleaguered parents, some whose children were actively doing *the thing*, some whose kids lived on the streets. A calm suffused the room that was at odds with Lily's emotions. Just hours earlier she'd had the locks changed. Just hours earlier she'd avoided answering her phone when a friend called. Just then, she had a rising bubble inside her that was threatening to escape out her mouth and possibly blow off the top of her head. But then the meeting was over, and she found herself talking one-on-one with the odious woman who had insisted on the orthodox method

People bore me — but that's only half the story. Speaking of reincarnations ... Who's afraid of Virginia Woolfe (sp) ?

— Morning — 10:30 AM — remembering the dream, Ted waking me up & drinking a bottle of wine & a few tokes. You roll in at 4:30 — just have to be somewhere else — must look up what C. calls Freudian forgetfulness & the magical memory. Will try the cards again with additional info. It is a truly deeply contemplative study. My goal for the next few days will be to let nothing disturb or excite me — a concentrated effort to regain equilibrium.

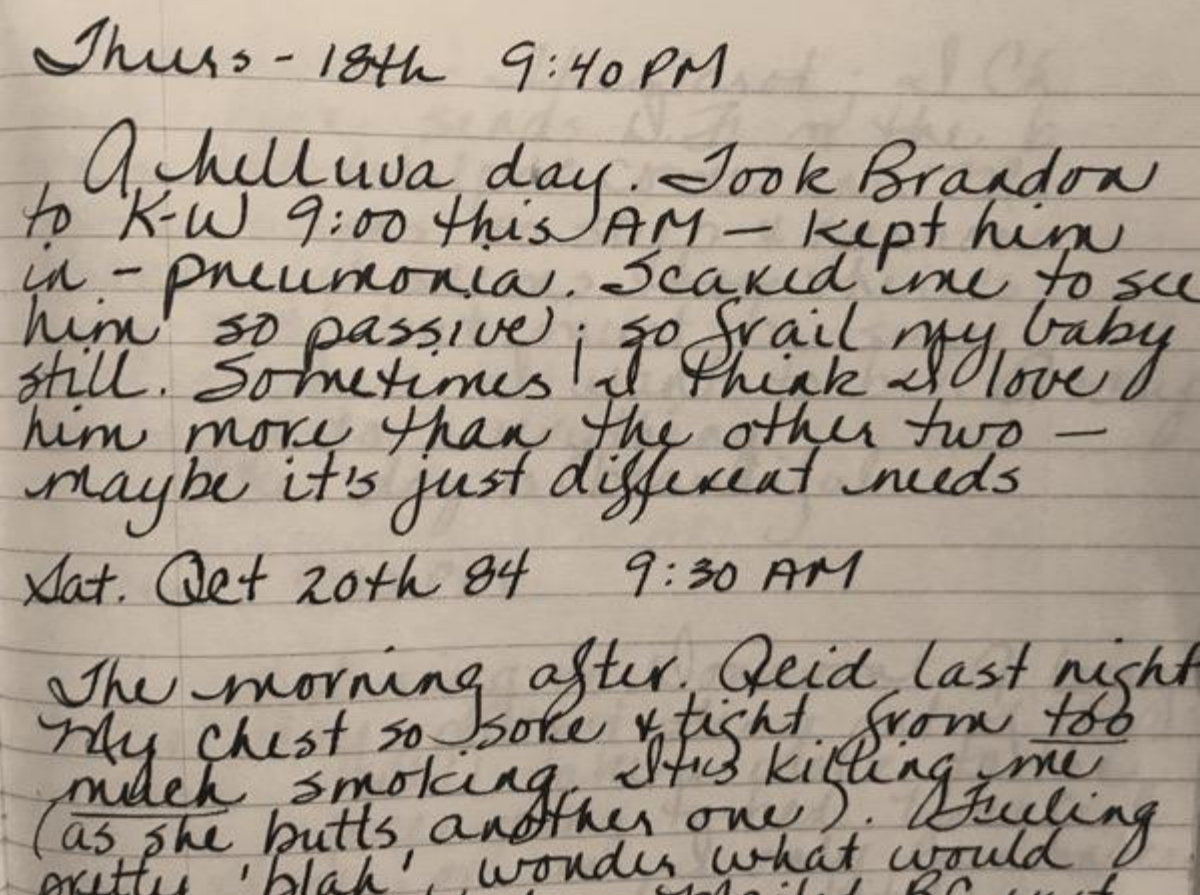
of seating, and despite her best intentions, a flood of words came out of her mouth instead of the desired explosion, and she heard herself acquiescing, agreeing, stroking the ego of this dumb bitch. As if the woman was right and she was wrong, and the only thing that was required to remedy the great fucking tragedy of this entire moronic situation was a right state of mind. It was her thinking that was the problem. Ah! Great insight! Thank you, thank you. It was clear to her now. She, herself, Lily was the problem! Crying

like a stupid person. The hand of the odious woman on her arm, nauseatingly close to Lily's hand. And then finally, she was outside in the dark and driving her car in the night air.

Ping, ping.

Lily cannot see inside the windows of the passing boat for they are mirrored, and all she sees is a rippled reflection of their own vessel streaming past. There are a handful of people outside, braving the wind and rain. She strains to see their features, a smudge of a face. If she were in a better mood, she would wave. One boat heading east, that was them; the other heading back from where they came. It is so easy to think about the situation changing. That what is happening is actually happening to someone else.

You did it to yourself. So, *a thing that was done with one's own hand* was a death sentence. If you drove your car in the dark, and you took your hand, and your hand did a thing, you could be left alone. Your name could be taken away. The certain thoughts that refuse to be unthought.



Thurs - 18th 9:40 PM
A helluva day. Took Brandon to K-W 9:00 this AM - kept him in - pneumonia. Scared me to see him so passive; so frail my baby still. Sometimes I think I love him more than the other two - maybe it's just different meds

Sat. Oct 20th 84 9:30 AM
The morning after. Reid last night my chest so sore & tight from too much smoking. It's killing me (as she butts another one). Feeling pretty 'blah', wonder what would

*

It was nighttime, and James wasn't home. Lily stood in the messy camp he had set up on the back deck—this was in the summer when James lived on the back deck— Lily had a roommate who had disapproved of *someone like James* living in the house. A woman Lily's age, a friend of hers and co-worker, whose face contracted in a grimace when she spied him loping through the house with his shirt off. Lily had been honest with the roommate about *the thing*, which was probably a mistake.

A conflict arose, and Lily agreed that James would not be allowed in the house when she was not home. So, how it worked was that he must sleep on the covered deck at the back of the house, and the door must be locked when she is not home.

There she stood amid a nest of clothes, and bowls, and blankets and a foam mattress he'd hauled out of the camping stuff.

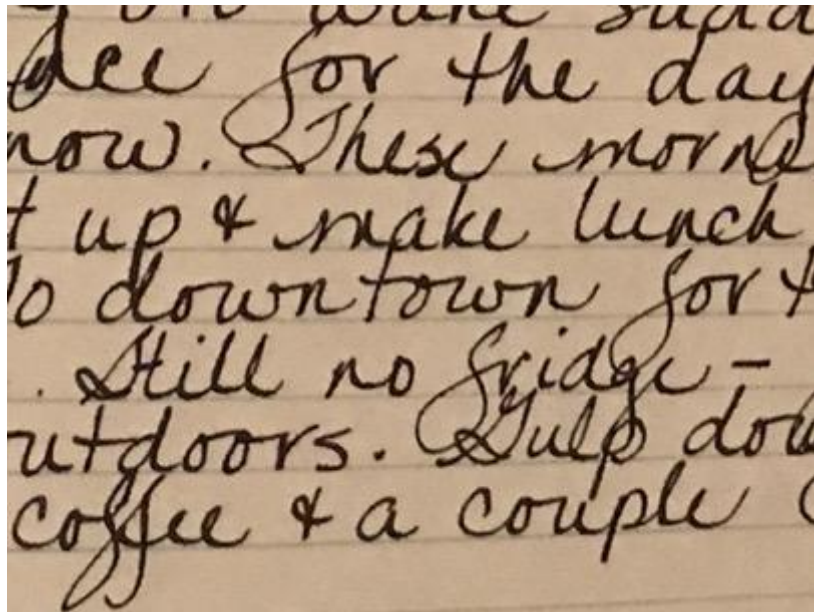
Ya, I'll be here when you get home from work, he had told her. And I'll go to that doctor's appointment, like you asked me.

He had his shirt off, and his bare chest unnerved her somehow. He had dark circles under his eyes.

Lily wanted to believe him. Attending an appointment with a doctor, for instance. They'd gone back to talking about him going to a place for people who do *the thing*, and a requisition from their family doctor was the first step in setting that up.

But now it was after 11pm, and he was nowhere to be found.

She walked back into the house. Mrs. Ramsey's ashes sat on the floor at the foot of her bed where she'd placed them when she got home from Ontario. Everything was in a kind of stasis that she could not seem to overcome.



She sat on her bed and cast and recast the Tarot cards that Mrs. Ramsey had her left until each card resembled the next. Salamanders and hung men and journeys and little white dogs. The future became a meaningless tense.

*

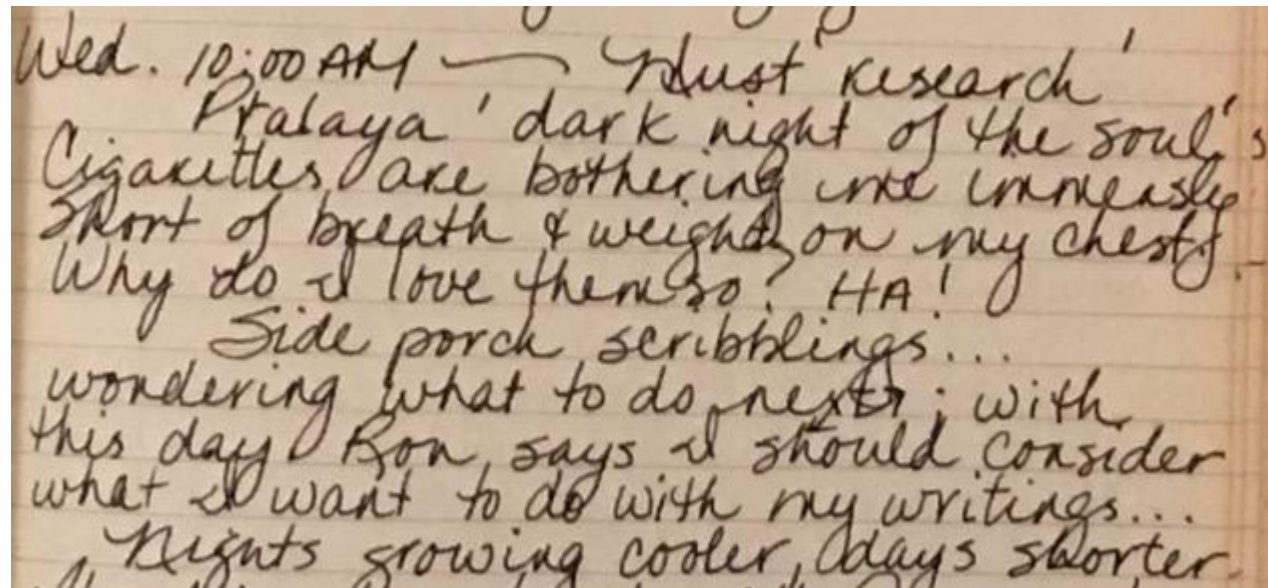
James came and went. Similarly, the days—some bringing resolve and bearing optimism like a gift, and other days bringing a

void of all things good and whole. One day, for instance, he agreed to go to a peer support group meeting. Lily was discretely overjoyed and drove him down to the community centre behind the highschool as if she were driving him to a cub-scout meeting, and waved goodbye from the car. Proud mother dropping her son off at a meeting with fellow people who do *the thing*. And yet she purposely didn't look in her rear-view mirror as she drove away, because in her deepest fear—what she knew to be true—it was very likely that he simply deked around the back of the building and took off.

He was supposed to be looking for a job, for a place to live. But most days, he slept till Lily got home from work and then went out. If she bugged him about this, he'd get angry and belligerent. Yelling at her, criticizing her. It was her fault. She'd driven him to it.

She wanted desperately to help him and then he was intolerable and she wanted him to go away.

And then it was morning, she was making coffee, and James was explaining how if Lily wasn't such a bitch, he wouldn't be in this situation, and



she could no longer contain her frustration.

Get out, get out! she screamed.

She sent him away.

And then messaged to see if he was okay.

*

The summer that James was 15, Lily took him camping on Galliano Island. It would be the last mom-and-kid camping trip that they would go on together. She didn't say it, but she knew what he was thinking—he was getting too old for camping with his mom.

It would be just Lily and James—camping in the little dome tent that they'd had since he was a kid—his foamy and sleeping bag on one side and her foamy and sleeping bag on the other side, joined in the middle where their foamies met—despite the fact that he was already six feet tall, and his feet pushed up against the edges of the tent.

They spent the first afternoon setting up camp and walking up and down the beach, collecting firewood. At night, they cooked dinner over the fire, roasted marshmallows, drank tea and looked at the stars. The next morning Lily woke hours before James and read in a lawn chair in a patch of sunlight near a grove of cedar trees. When he got up, they drove up to Bodega Ridge, hiked around there for the afternoon, and sat in the parched grass below the ponderosa pines and watched from far above, the ferries gliding up through Active Pass, the narrows between Galliano and Mayne Island. It had taken them some moments to figure out where they were, because of course everything looked strange and remote so high above the water.

That evening, a wind came up, so making a fire was out of the question. They cooked their food on the Coleman stove, and right after they'd cleared away the few dishes, the first drops of rain began. They grabbed their stuff and ducked into the tent, and with the tent flap open, watched the sky darken, and the cedar trees above bend and sway in the strong wind. Flashes of lightening rolled across the sky, and the air boomed with thunder only a second or two after the flash. The storm was right upon them. The little dome tent

flattened on one side, pummeled by the wind. They could hear people all over the campsite talking in loud voices—securing thrashing tarps and gathering up equipment. The disembodied voices unaccountably loud, as if the air had become super capable of amplifying sound.

The wind blew and the lightening flashed and the thunder boomed. Every so often, a few fat drops of rain pelted the side of the dome tent. James and Lily looked at each other in mock fear—or was it real fear? And then an instinct shook her, and in an instant, she said to James, should we go for a drive? And then, the two of them, in tandem, leapt from the tent, closed the zipper behind them, and clambered into the car.

As they drove slowly out of the campsite, feeling somewhat like deserters as they passed the darkened tents and shuttered motorhomes, the rain came down in earnest, and a massive bang shook the car. With one loud sinister crack, the lightening and the thunder struck simultaneously, illuminating everything unnaturally, and shaking the two of them so thoroughly that Lily felt the echo in her heart. Was the car enough to protect them? She steered the car out of the campsite onto the narrow highway, past the little harbor where they could see the boats bobbing and swinging in the flashing light.

They drove like this for some time. The food was in the car, in grocery bags in the back seat, so James undid his seatbelt, leaned into the back and got a bag of chips which he opened, and they just drove, slowly, in third gear, watching the forest pass, cedar trees and hemlock trees bowed over in the wind, the windshield wipers going, eating salt and vinegar chips, with the radio turned low, almost inaudible.

After about thirty minutes or so driving in one direction, they turned around and drove back. By the time they approached the little harbor, the rain had stopped, so they pulled in, and leaving the car lights on, walked toward the pier to where the boats were still vigorously bobbing in the water.

They walked out onto the sloshing wooden pier together against a resistance that Lily could feel in her body. She knew that James could feel her fear, which by this point had enlarged and spread out over the evening in a general way, so that she found she was vaguely afraid of everything. Along the pier, lights in metal standards swung in the remnant gusts of wind, and every so often, a few drops of rain would loosen from somewhere—the sky, the branches of a faraway tree—and scatter across the wooden pier in a staccato of droplets. Waves, that they could hear but not see, slopped up against the pier, and the whole pier rocked as the sea adjusted to the wake of the storm.

As they walked, she had a strong feeling that they should turn back, though there was no rational reason to be afraid. James walked ahead gingerly, toward the end of the pier and the black water. Immense spiders and their nests—black, articulated bodies and pendulous flecked webs half-wrecked by the rain— were visible all along the pier between the arc of the metal light standards and the suspended globed bulbs, and the odd insect or moth that had ventured out after the storm circled wildly their certain deaths. And then, before they even reached the end of the pier, something in her body made her turn around. Something that was coming, arriving, which she could not stop. She made up a story about the car, or needing to return to the campsite, and James, usually so truculent, turned the moment she did, and they walked back down the wooden pier and toward the headlights of the waiting car.

The morning after the storm, James again slept late, and again, Lily spent the morning in a lawn chair reading. When he woke up, she cooked bacon and eggs on the Coleman stove. The pale fatty slices curled up in the pan. She always cooked it too much, James said. This time, she was careful and took it out of the pan when it was still limp and pale, the way he liked it. She had a big day planned—they would travel up the Island and hike out to a seaside provincial park where there were interesting rock formations—sandstone laid down 65 million years ago and eroded by saltwater to form massive honeycomb formations. Couldn't they go home today instead of tomorrow, James asked? Lily was disappointed, but didn't say so. Most of their stuff was already packed because of the rain the night before, so they had only to take down the tent and roll up their sleeping things, and they were on their way. They caught the 4pm ferry, and sat in the car on the car deck instead of mounting the metal stairs that led to the observation lounge, preferring the quiet of the car, not really speaking very much to one another, but watching the slap and spray of green-black water going by and the late afternoon slanting rays of the sun. It was late August and the days were already getting shorter.

*

And anyway, the help that was offered, the kind she could manage to access anyhow, was all of a similar sort. It reminded Lily of when she took Mrs. Ramsey for an interview about the hospice. What was explained was that the process of death could not and would not be arrested—hospice was a place where the dying one could be made comfortable. For instance, at the hospice, if one wanted ice cream for supper—while one was dying—that was okay. That was something one could ask for.

They are in the open water now, the green blotches of the Gulf Islands behind them, and ahead, the long grey horizon of the main land. We're almost there, Lily says to James, harassing him affectionately with her foot. He responds by opening one eye.

Or when Lily was in labour with James. The pain that would not stop, kept coming on—this is what the deep breathing was supposed to address. The midwife down in Lily's face telling her to breathe, breathe, and Lily had done so—but of course, the breathing did nothing for the pain—Lily discovered this in an epiphany of despair. It simply stopped her from holding her breath. It was merely a distraction from the pain.

The kind of help that Lily could access, that was available to her (once she signed up, filled in the form, waited an interminable period (weeks, months), qualified for assistance, met the conditions, and attended the info session)—that kind of help was no fucking use whatsoever. It amounted to being invited to sit in a small room and tell someone her problems. And then that person nodded empathetically and provided a tissue or a pamphlet or a fact-sheet, and then went home for dinner. And Lily went home, back to her problems. What she needed was for someone to help James. Or actually help her.

After Lily'd given birth to James, after a long and exhausting labour, he lay on her stomach and raised his eyes to look at her. To Lily it seemed as if he'd just returned from a grueling journey.

They were equals then, that day. Lily sensed they owned a similar intellect, that they thought the same thoughts. She would have trusted him then, had he been capable, of telling her practically anything. If he'd raised his eyes to hers and with his gravelly old voice said, we need to get out of here, she'd have wrapped him in blankets, dressed as best she could, and escaped.

Ping, ping, ping.

Sue Kū Weaving, destroying
3y of major power

about 7:00 AM Jan 1st. 1985

Listening to Mme. Sorel's &
Brian Mulroney's New Year's
address, sitting in Brandon's bed
with a couple beers & a joint smoking
cigarettes

So - 1985 -

These mornings after... we
carry carry on as if... (nothing)
What (?) has happened.

Me cloistered in this small room
you still sleeping (it off) so what
will this first day of 1985 hold?

Sat. Jan 12/85 11:30 AM

Another row last night. This one
at Shawn & Allison's. Came home
alone; more bruises. No faith left
for this. I want it to stop.

Some of the coldest temp. this
winter (I imagine*) I am up alone.
I look around this house, impressed
with it's majesty, think about a
business proposition here; think about
the futile efforts to maintain a
relationship with Ron. Baby, we
can't agree - maybe it's not hurting
you but it's hurting me.

I'm cold baby. Furnace off all
night long. This old house sure takes
a while to warm up. Can't stand the

Tues. (~~Wed.~~) 1:00 AM — a difficulty
in writing lately; haven't much
desire to catalogue or chronicle (sp)
events or thoughts — yet —
The boys home from the holidays
Sonny off again tonight to play
hockey. A quiet evening with
Brandon. Cleaned his room,
swept a comforter, made a
beek & potato soup. January 1985
— a reflective time. Ron & Ted
getting the music together — first
jam Sunday (past) & fret & feel
left out sometimes — yet want it
to be — my own selfishness to
deal with. Anyway — lots to do.
Brandon needs lots of attention ☺

Part Two: Time Passes

When Son was 17, Mom and he travelled to Duat together. They would travel by horse westward across the sun-drenched valley through the tobacco fields and farmlands to some caves at the foot of a low mountain. The owner of the house where they were staying had arranged for her nephew to take them there. Anubis, the nephew, came to fetch them and walked them a short distance to his father's farm and a small bumpy paddock where

He said in his language to another young man, sporting a broad brimmed hat and rubber boots, to give them two easy horses, and after he had saddled and held the saddle, directing first Mom and then Son's feet into the stirrups and heaving them up by the bum. Duat but being on the back of a horse is a still formidable experience, and Mom could tell by Son's face, who had never ridden before, that he was shocked a little, for he had a small smile on his face that told her fact, he had not wanted to come riding at back at the house, with Son arguing for



four or five skinny horses were kept. man, sporting a broad brimmed hat horses, and after he had saddled held the saddle, directing first Mom heaving them up by the bum. Duat but being on the back of a horse is a could tell by Son's face, who had apprehensive, shocked a little, for he nervousness rather than pleasure. In all, and they'd had a tiring debate simply lying down in the cool of the

house and watching grainy Theban TV for the afternoon and Mom for tromping out through the farmlands to a cave she had read about.

Mom won, and as they bumped their way through the valley on their respective horses, Son up front, Mom behind him, and Anubis trailing behind them both, Mom had some regretful feelings about forcing him to come horseback riding. She wanted these experiences for her—well, she wanted them for Son, but she also wanted them for herself. She wanted childhood not to end. She wanted to be with Son while she was still able. They would never be 17 and 42 again, and she knew this. It seemed even then a perverted sense of nostalgia—a nostalgia for things a time traveler, she sped forward into the what she was losing, streaking ahead of her

The horses knew the trail mostly by tug of the reins to the right or the left to guide ahead of them, *right*, or *left*, in English. He



which are not even yet passed—grew in her. Like future, the pain of what she was leaving behind,

heart, so all that was required was the occasional them when the path forked, and Anubis would yell knew these words and a few others that made

leading English-speaking tourists possible. Anubis sat easily in his saddle, while Son and Mom, when the horses picked up their pace and began to gallop, banged up and down on the horses' backs. Grip with your thighs and relax into it, Mom yelled ahead to Son who bumped up and down on his horse like a wack-em-ball.

They passed fields in which men followed behind oxen that plowed through thick red mud. Everything in Duat was done the traditional way. Anubis pointed out all this to mom dutifully in single words of English—*black beans, corn, pumpkin, cassava, pineapples, tobacco*—and she tried the words in Demotic, and thus they had a meager conversation. She loved seeing all the various crops pushing up through the rills of bright red soil. They grow everything here, she said to Anubis in his language, and he nodded in agreement. It was iron, or some sort of mineral, he didn't know, Anubis said, that made the soil so red. Look, Mom said to Son, pointing out the strange tuft of a pineapple plant, but he only nodded to show his lack of enthusiasm.

After some time they came to a tobacco drying shed, beside a smaller wooden structure, and once Anubis had tied up their horses in the shade of a sour orange tree, he motioned for them to follow him into the wooden structure, which was like a bunkhouse, painted bright

turquoise inside, with a single bed, a few chickens wandering in and out, and a row of bright red rocking chairs lined up in the shadow



of the broad overhanging roof. Inside, they met Anubis's father, who explained to them how the tobacco was dried, cured, and then finally, rolled, demonstrating the method with a large tobacco leaf on his knee. Finally, handing the rolled cigar to Son, and lighting it for him, placed his hat on Son's head. Mom took a photo of Anubis and Anubis's dad, sitting in rocking chairs in their rubber boots, and Son standing between them wearing the father's straw hat, the lit cigar held nonchalantly between the two fingers of his raised hand, the other resting casually on the angle of his hip, looking vaguely like a gunslinger or a rebel outlaw, with his lively hair and his faint moustache.

After the tobacco hut, where Mom bought forty cigars for forty pesos (she didn't smoke but understood this was the price one paid for such a trip), they got back on their horses and headed for what Anubis called the *Valley of the Kings*. Mom didn't know the story of these caves, only that they were karst caves, limestone, having been created by the dual action of the sea as it retreated from the land millions of years ago and the eons of rain that had dripped down, eroding out wormholes and caverns and scribbles of empty space within the solid mountain, and that the cave system inside the mountains, moguts as they were called, was the second-most extensive in Thebes, looping back and under the mountains for hundreds of kilometers. When they got to the base of the mountain, Anubis tied up the horses and led Son and Mom to the mouth of the cave. He wouldn't be going in with them, he explained. But if they walked on a

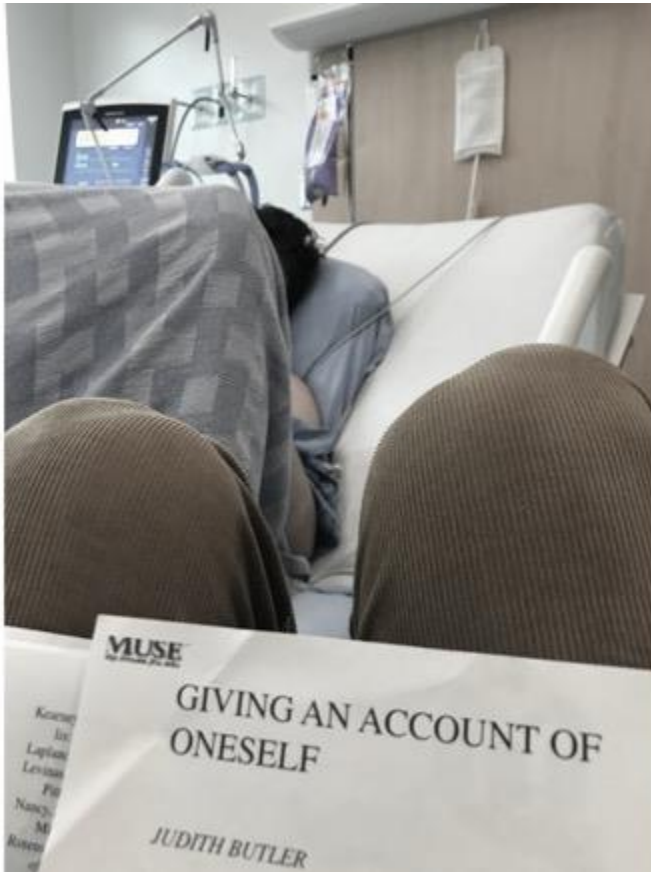
bit farther, they would come to them, for two coins each, Son set off alone together, at the mouth of the cave and overhung, their eyes adjusting upon an old man of seventy or place where the mouth of the a strongly accented language each, and once he'd tucked the



an old man, who would lead inside the mountain. Mom and scrambling on some loose rock ducking to avoid rocks that to the dim light, until they came so who beckoned to them at the cave lost light. He told them in that they should pay two coins money in a leather satchel, he

waved them onward with his hand. He had two flashlights. He gave one to Son and kept one himself. They followed the beam of his flashlight as he walked ahead of them. The floor and the walls of the cave were uneven, requiring that they simultaneously keep their eyes on the beam ahead and manage the vague impression of cave floor directly below them, which was in darkness, and which was truthfully, more of a ledge than a path, which they picked through. Rivulets of calcite and projecting humps of calcified rock around which they wound. Mom could tell from Son's silence that he was concentrating on following the old man, who did not hesitate as he led them, but did stop from time to time to tell them something in his language that Mom could barely make out. There were words like millions or maybe it was thousands. Or billions. She couldn't tell. And also, the sea. An action that he made by placing his two hands, one with the flashlight and the other empty, into the air so that for a moment the ceiling with its burgeoning stalactites was lit up, and

then he made a sound with his mouth that sounded like a tired sigh, but which she assumed was the action of waves. Then they walked on, and after some time, the old man stopped again, this time to show them with the beam of his flashlight massive stalagmites forming



stately columns that fused the cave floor to the ceiling, and also huge humped accumulations of white calcite, which they could pass their hands over as they walked by, smoothed by the action of zillions of drops of water falling in the dark.

Finally, they came to the end of the cave, or at least as far as they would be going. With the beam of the flashlight, the old man presented to them a dark body of water in a large vaulted room, like a pool in pitch-black cathedral, a water that they had heard as they walked, coursing along beside them somewhere outside their field of vision, but now was visible in the beam of his light. They could swim, the old man said, making quick breaststroke motions with his hands. Son and Mom looked at each other, and Mom said she would swim, not waiting for Son's response. She took off her shorts and shirt and went in her bra and

underwear, not sure if Son would follow her. The water was cool but not cold. She swam out, not daring to put her feet down for fear of what she might touch. All the while, the old man illuminated the space right in front of Mom with the flashlight. So that as she swam, what was behind her vanished in darkness, but what was ahead of her lit up with an eerie light. Then she heard the water behind her. It

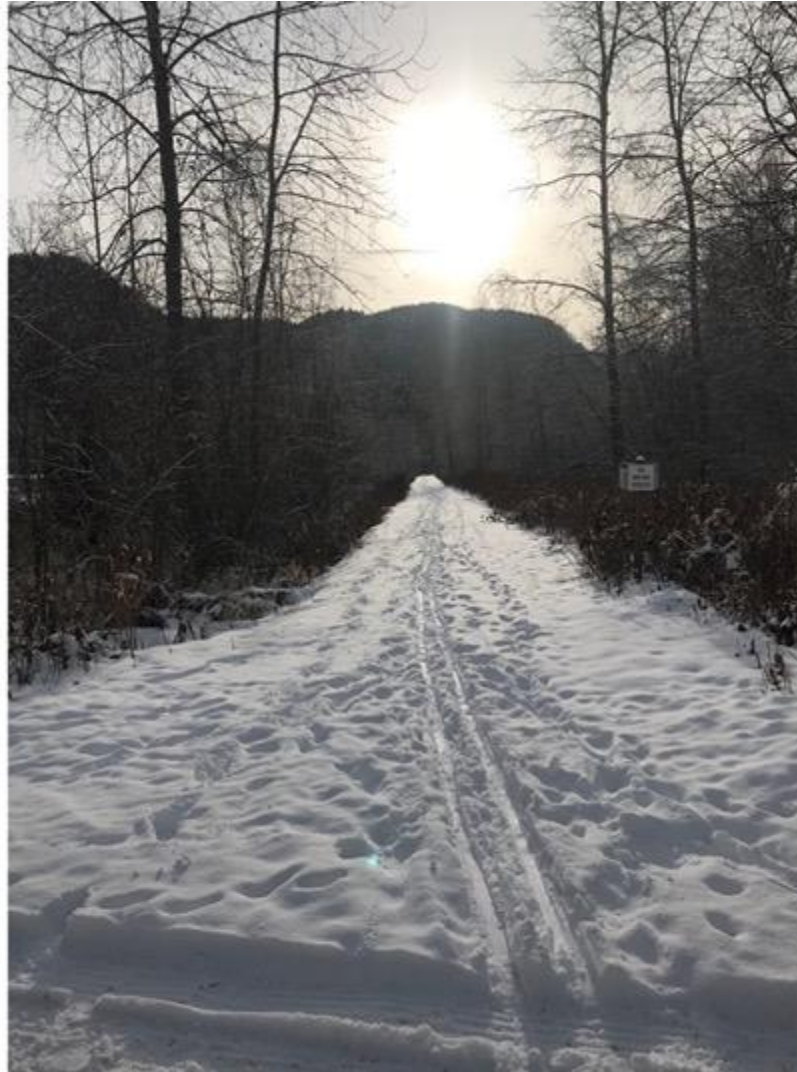
was Son, she saw, in his white boxer shorts, lowering himself into the water. Now the old man divided the light between them, so that Son could ease into the water, and when he did, she swam ahead into the darkness with an increasing boldness. She struck the top of her foot on an underwater ledge as she passed the far wall of the cave, and an intense pain passed through her. But it was okay; it was just a bit of pain. Mom swam on; then Son was behind her, and now they swam on in the single beam. I wonder how far we can go, she said to Son, and she could tell by the look on his face, wet and breathless, expectant, that he felt as she did. That the cave was endless, and that it was possible to go farther, to simply keep swimming. For now she could see that the body of water in which they swam connected by way of a narrow passage, and continued on and on, right into the centre of the mountain. If they wanted to return—they could simply look for the old man on the shore lighting the way back for them.

*



On the way back, Anubis got the horses to go fast. They were wet in their clothes, and dirty from the mud at the edge of the swimming hole in the cave. Son had a streak of mud on his face. Mom's shirt was soaked through. Anubis cut a switch from a bush as they passed, and handed it to Mom. When she looked confused as to what he wanted her to do with the switch, he made a motion of whipping the horse's rear, the very gesture of which caused the horse to pick up its pace. She said, no, thanks. Did she want to go fast, Anubis repeated; she

said, yes, but. It is only a horse, he said, it's okay; then hit her horse with the switch. The action was automatic. Her horse surged ahead, and now instead of slapping the saddle with her wet bum, she moved with the horse as it streaked across the field. It was like the unloading of a spring, the way the horse folded in the middle and then opened out with its body and legs, and she moved with it, hanging on with both hands, gripping the couldn't tell if the horse hated her stroked its rigid ears with her free saddle—the hand that held the hate or love—she didn't care—it attention, to hang on and not fall go on, flying across the broad the edge of her vision, Son's behind her at break-neck speed. If everything, but she had no time to abandoning him or showing him keep going until the horse slowed. need to look back.



horse's ribs with her thighs. She or loved her. Earlier she had hand—the one not grasping the reins. But now it didn't matter—took all her effort, all her off. The horse, she knew, would valley without her. She saw, at horse, also careening up the path one of them fell, it would change think about whether she was the way. She would hang on and There was no need to stop. No

Part Three: The Gas Station

They are nearing the ferry terminal. Lily's hand rises of its own accord, feeling for the bump on her forehead. She uses the tip of her fingers to trace across the surface of the tender mound.

The horizon of the mainland appears as a flat line of grey, sheathed in grey clouds. Invisible are the mountains that rise up to the east of the coastal river delta. Soon they would be driving through there. First, the city and its snaking highways and bridges, auto shops and strip malls, and then the soggy farmland. And finally, they would climb the coast mountains. Sharp shards of rock furred over with green that seem to hold up the sky.

Lily jostles James who has fallen into a deep sleep. Rise, O son, for we now depart this bark of a million years for the land of your father. We should go down to the car.

As she stands, she feels the full effect of the underwear. The longer she wears it, the less tawdry she feels. It's not perfect, but it will do.

They make their way down the stairs to the lower car decks, and as they walk, she watches without seeming to watch—whether people notice them. She feels protective of James who walks with his eyes to the ground. The underwear casts a powerful charm, averting the eyes of strangers. When she notices someone who seems to let his gaze rest a little too long on the specter that is James's

figure, Lily stares straight at him, bats her blue eyelids, flashing a warning. She straightens her posture and aims the discordantly colourful breasts. She walks in such a way that her long legs assert her bare ass.

She wears the powerful, secretive underwear of the bad babysitter, the brilliantly blue eyeshadow, and she wears the glasses of the good babysitter. The glasses that will allow her to see God. For now it is obvious that anything she can do, write, or say about James or herself, *the things they do*, must be in the service of divinity. She pushes the glasses of the good babysitter a little higher on her nose where they have slid down.

They have descended the great metal stair cases that take them into the bowels of the boat. If she writes about this part, thinks Lily, it could seem like they are descending deeper into the black water, farther from the surface of the earth. It was frightening to think about, this thing that was approaching but that she did not know how to talk about. When Mrs. Ramsey was dying, the very end, that is, they said very little.

Most of what had to be discussed—powers of attorney and wills and such—had been gone over in the fall when the details of dying still seemed remote and fictional—though that was strange, too. Because it was precisely an event that could be talked about but not imagined. Thus they talked up and down around this thing that they knew was coming but which they could not apprehend.

Middle of February

Recent snows cover everything in white; the drifts standing 2 & 3 feet deep on roofs & alcoves & great collections of icicles like stalactites hang in hoary array. All nature seems to rest in suspended animation inside... The heat is on. Morning sun thru the blind in the dining room falls on the new ivy & the little pot of crocuses peeping purple against the glass. So this was the coup de grace. Last night's — what could you call it — ? a bizarre sort of pas de deux — played against the foreground of this new day. Middle of February.

"What now, my love?" Surely there isn't a single place of sanctity that hasn't been invaded by one or the other. We sit in silence, both window gazing. You polish your boots & go out. I look around & see everything an exercise in futility. There is nothing left to do but go. The patterns loom before me. Apophis reigns (reigns) seems so long since I've really laughed.

Before she had gotten too bad, in the autumn, they watched documentaries on TV. The death rites of the Egyptians, or the progress of the Indo-Europeans. It was during those evenings that she would haul herself up from the couch and rise unsteadily to pull books down off the shelf, saying which ones she wanted Lily to have.

It might start with a common but favourite novel—a faraway setting, an audacious and independent heroine—Norse mythology, Bulgakov, Garcia Marquez—magic—but as if progressing to some sort of apex, her fingers would inevitably come to rest on a yellowed volume—her icon, the theosophist Madame Blavatsky—with its fold-out illustration of the Tree of Life.

Lily visited again, in January, during the time right before Mrs. Ramsey went into hospice. It would be her last weeks of wellness. Well, relative wellness. The promised results of the chemo that nearly killed her. Lily flew out and spent two weeks with her and her brother, Jasper. Lily was there, in part, to prepare Jasper for independent living after Mrs. Ramsey died. He was thirty-six, and he had extra-ordinary abilities—for instance he could hear what people were thinking, and he knew sometimes that they could hear his thoughts, too; also, he could see among the living, gods and demons—and had been living with Mrs. Ramsey for the past thirty-six years.

As if atoning for her wild early years, Mrs. Ramsey had grown orthodox in her parenting style, or else she had simply grown tired of her bohemian past. She and Jasper had their routines. During the day, Mrs. Ramsey worked at an insurance company a few blocks away and Jasper took courses toward his GED at the Learning Centre in the library across the street. They both came home for lunch at noon and ate a bowl of tomato soup. In the evenings, Mrs. Ramsey would send him with her bankcard to the Chinese store on the corner to buy her smokes and a bag of BBQ chips that she put in a small wicker basket lined with paper towel, and which they shared in front of the TV, watching a lineup that began after an early supper with *Jeopardy* and ended around 9pm when Jasper put on his freshly laundered pajamas and took his bedtime meds, which Mrs. Ramsey never failed to remind him of.

Many people who have extra-ordinary abilities end up on the street, off medication, far gone in their what they can see and hear, without the support of family, and despite what Lily criticized as Mrs. Ramsey's somewhat codependent relationship with Jasper, Lily appreciated how much Mrs. Ramsey had sacrificed in order to care for him. She had seen him through many hospitalizations, drug

My appetite is poor & I'm thinner than ever. Don't even feel like going out for a walk - 'can't stand the weather!'
— After midnight — thinking about the dream — yes, everyone was there — & I was running in terror again — alienated; alone; scared for the kids; invaded by strangers. You think I'm a snob because people bore me — but that's only half the story. Speaking of reincarnations ... Who's afraid of Virginia Woolfe (sp)?
— Morning — 10:30 AM — remembering the dream, Ted waking me up & drinking a bottle of wine & ... You roll in at 4:30 —

changes, and courses of treatment. The phase of taking off his clothes in public, or suddenly hitchhiking across the province without his meds; the Am-I-the-Devil? phase, and the counter-phase to that: Is (dad, aunt Diane, the red-haired woman at the Toronto Dominion Bank)-God? phase. It had aged her, Lily could see, this constant burden of care. She saw, too, how much she had changed over the years—although Mrs. Ramsey was overbearing and at times openly resentful—she could hardly be accused of inattentiveness or neglect where Lily's brother was concerned.

On more than a few snowy mornings,

Jasper and Lily would head out to Tim Hortons, where they could discuss plans for him without Mrs. Ramsey interjecting from the couch where she reclined most days, fending off the pain of the cancer in her bones with regular injections of hydromorphone. She had very distinct ideas about his care after she died—and wanted, it seemed, to extend her care for Jasper beyond her lifetime. Lily felt

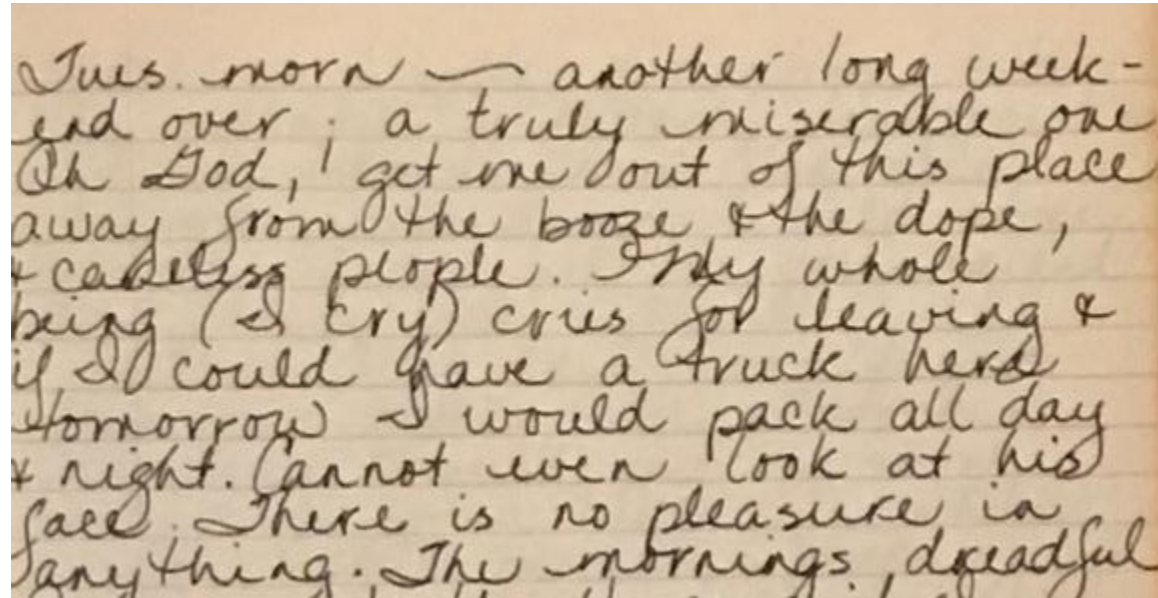
she had to separate out her time so as to not spend too much alone time with her brother—there was a subtly insinuated hierarchy of control—Mrs. Ramsey was still the boss, even if her power was fading. Lily saw it as a delicate balancing act of allowing her some say—or the notion that she had some say—and encouraging her to let go of her son as a mother’s concern and enjoy the last weeks of her life as an independent person. In her mind, which was full of the importance of living, Lily interpreted such actions as Mrs. Ramsey being jealous of the time Lily was spending with Jasper. She could not know what Mrs. Ramsey thinking. A wall came up in her mind as to what Mrs. Ramsey intended, but a memory occurred to her as she walked in the snow: Lily was five or six years old. They were living on the fifth floor of an apartment building, the place they moved to after Mrs. Ramsey packed up their things one morning while Mr. Ramsey was at work. Mrs. Ramsey sat in a reclining chair in the sun on their balcony. She was allowing Lily to gently unearth ingrown hair on her legs, shiny from shaving. Lily had such small, gentle fingers, Mrs. Ramsey said, and Lily worked earnestly, lovingly, squeezing the follicle that entrapped the hair, the tiny plug of sebum and the single stubborn hair rising majestically to the surface.

*

This would be the last time they spent together in her apartment. Snow fell steadily down; inside, they sat around a filing cabinet choked with files. Her guilty pleasure, she called it. Loads and loads of printed pages from *Wikipedia* that she had printed out at the

insurance company where she had worked an administrative assistant. “Magical Realism,” “Ottoman Palestine,” “Hermeneutics,” bound together with an efficient staple. She’d never been to university and was entirely self-taught. And her journals, which she wanted Lily to have.

Forty years of her experiences, her thoughts. Lily had seen Mrs. Ramsey’s journals over the years—open on a table beside her cigarettes, a glimpse of her distinctive script— and they had a mythic association in her mind. Lily knew she would have liked to have published something in her lifetime. She wondered if Mrs. Ramsey thought Lily might make herself responsible for that. Lily didn’t offer. She was curious to read them though, and she felt Mrs. Ramsey’s approval of her in that it was Lily she charged with their safekeeping.

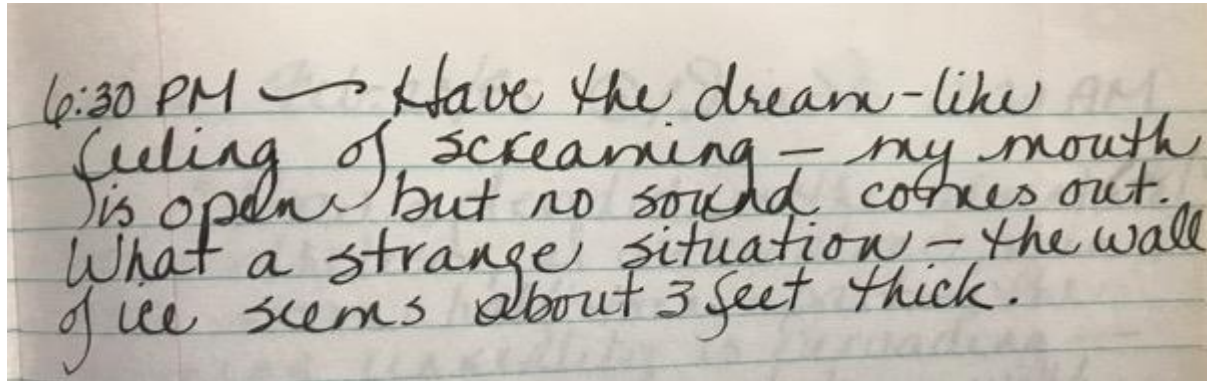


Tues. morn — another long week-end over; a truly miserable one. Oh God, I get me out of this place away from the booze & the dope, & careless people. My whole being (I cry) cries for leaving & if I could have a truck here tomorrow I would pack all day & night. Cannot even look at his face. There is no pleasure in anything. The mornings, dreadful

*

And then there was nothing to say and Mrs. Ramsey and Lily no longer discussed things of importance. All that was over, it seemed, and there was just now the strange, airy process of dying.

Lily had the hospice. It was staying in a hotel Ramsey even Lily's room was



6:30 PM -> Have the dream-like feeling of screaming - my mouth is open but no sound comes out. What a strange situation - the wall of ice seems about 3 feet thick.

her own room at like they were together. Mrs. asked Lily how when she first

arrived in the same way one might ask, how's your room? at the Howard Johnson.

Now, whatever phrases Mrs. Ramsey uttered from her bed concerned almost entirely the very present tense. Is the nurse coming, where is her tiny paper cup of pills, the kidney-shaped basin?

She merely glanced at the blue hyacinths Lily brought into the room one afternoon and placed on the table beside the bed. Over there, she said, lifting her hand mere centimeters from the mattress, gesturing in a general way to the opposite side of the room, and reinstating her kidney shaped basin and paper cup of pills to the centre of the table.

Just a few days previous, she had been able, with considerable assistance, to sit up in bed. And a day or two before that, Lily might find her struggling to lift herself onto her elbow. Mrs. Ramsey might look up at Lily with her increasing wild eyes and say merely, *dangle*. Which meant that she wanted to be able to sit and hang her legs off the bed.

A few days before that, she might have, with Lily's assistance put her feet into her slippers, and with Lily's assistance, be lifted to standing. The nurses had modeled how to do this. It required that the tube draining Mrs. Ramsey's urine first be unhooked from the bed. Lily had watched a nurse attach the sack of urine to her own belt loop, and she did the same. It was almost comic, this macabre

dance, where Lily walked backward, buoyed with earnestness, with the urine sloshing against her hip, while gently but firmly holding an ethereal Mrs. Ramsey under the arms and directing her feet toward Lily's own so that bit by bit, shuffle by shuffle, backwards together they could proceed—and together they could turn and lower Mrs. Ramsey to a chair that had been raised via a switch to meet her sinking body.

Once seated, if it was a good day, Mrs. Ramsey could take the controller, which looked like a remote for the TV, and push a button and lower the chair. A sinewy queen upon her pedestal. Sometimes, the hospice people brought in a meal on a tray. Lily noticed that Mrs. Ramsey just picked at her food, ignoring the more nutritious aspects of the meal and poking instead at the dessert. Wasn't the food delicious, she exclaimed. Which was ironic because Lily had just spent the last nine months trying to get her to eat. And also, because the food was not very good—it was the standard sort of institutional food one might find in a residential hospice setting.

This is really lovely, Mrs. Ramsey exclaimed, pushing aside her broccoli and eating the icing off a mini-carrot cake.

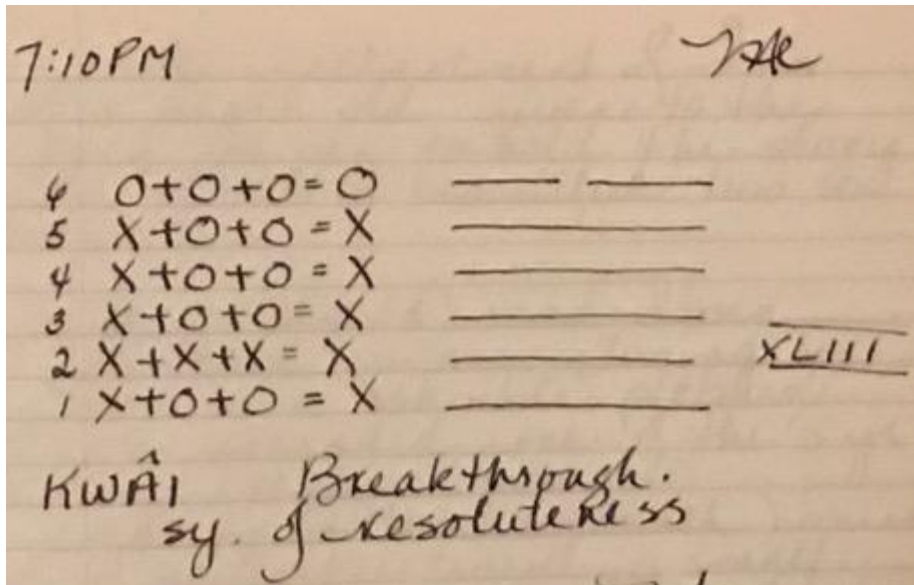
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But that was all in the past, and now there were only long afternoons of silence. Yet, one day, out of the blue, she said something. They were spending time together, in the way that they now did. Lily crashed out on the love seat that was too short so that her legs hung over the arm, and Mrs. Ramsey, propped up with pillows in her high hospital bed. Contrary to the past, where the air might have been filled up with conversation—about books or films, the weather—now they spent time merely lying alongside one another without the distraction of words. Mrs. Ramsey broke a long silence and recited, in what seemed an ironic voice, three out of the four lines of "Balloon of the Mind" by Yeats.

Lily felt a kind of existential chill. The image of the coffin-like shed, the dragging balloon. Outside, the sky was white, and Mrs. Ramsey looked beyond the foot of her hospital bed with its accompanying plastic pneumatic mattress to ward off bedsores, and the sac of urine, which gave off a solemn smell. A sliding glass door leading to a small balcony that they never went out on looked on to the back of a Canadian Tire, and Lily could see a single leafless tree emerging improbably between two dumpsters.

Another such time Mrs. Ramsey said something nostalgic was three or four days before her death, when, dreamily brushing her hand across her forehead and through what was left of her wispy hair, she said, remember Harrison? referring to a time Lily had taken her and James along to Harrison Hotsprings, a mountain resort where she was participating in a conference.

It was a particularly adult moment in Lily's life, being able to take her mom and her son to a conference at which she was presenting. During the day, Mrs. Ramsey and James, who was about twelve at the time, soaked in the hot springs and walked along the cold blue lake together. Lily met them in the evenings, and at night they watched TV together, propped up with pillows in the soft wide



beds.

*

The last momentous thing that Mrs. Ramsey said to Lily was simply this: *life is good*. She declared this after one of their customary long bouts of silence. They were in their usual places.

Mrs. Ramsey's eyes were closed. The dry heat in the room was palpable; dusk was coming down and filling the room with a blue light. It's true, Lily had agreed. How something could be two things at once.

*

One evening during the summer, Lily unpacks a box of books, placing the twenty or so volumes of her mother's journals in an auspicious spot on the shelf below Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, and Didion's *A Year of Magical Thinking*.

This gets Lily on a reading binge, searching through the journals' pages, which when turned, give off a far-away whiff of cigarettes and pot, a smell that transports her. She's not sure exactly what she's looking for, but she's watching for her name, for sure. Her focus intensifies on a journal that spans from Tuesday, December 15, 1987 to Saturday, May 6th, 1989, the period of time when Lily was 16 and 17 years-old. She flips through the pages voraciously: evocative descriptions of weather, plans for the garden, accounts of the progress of pot seeds she is germinating, K boiling sap in the bush behind the house, lilacs blooming. A recipe for basil pesto. Several I Ching hexagram casts: On Mon. Feb./8/88 9:15am *Ta Kuo*—The Preponderance of the Great—Image of Lake over Wind & Wood—*the situation will not hold*.

Fifty or so pages of purple prose about K.

And then, finally, her eyes fall upon it. Lily at sixteen years-old, leaving home. Mrs. Ramsey driving Lily to the Greyhound station.

Tues. June 29/88 ~four days after my birthday. Tomorrow, 7:00am Jess leaves from Owen Sound to Penticton BC. K has given me 'Urantia' book for my birthday. A really cool wind off the lake...Gardening efforts—I have lost much to damp off— 'tho I bought the medicine I did not use it. Gypsum is flowering but of 'untidy habit'.

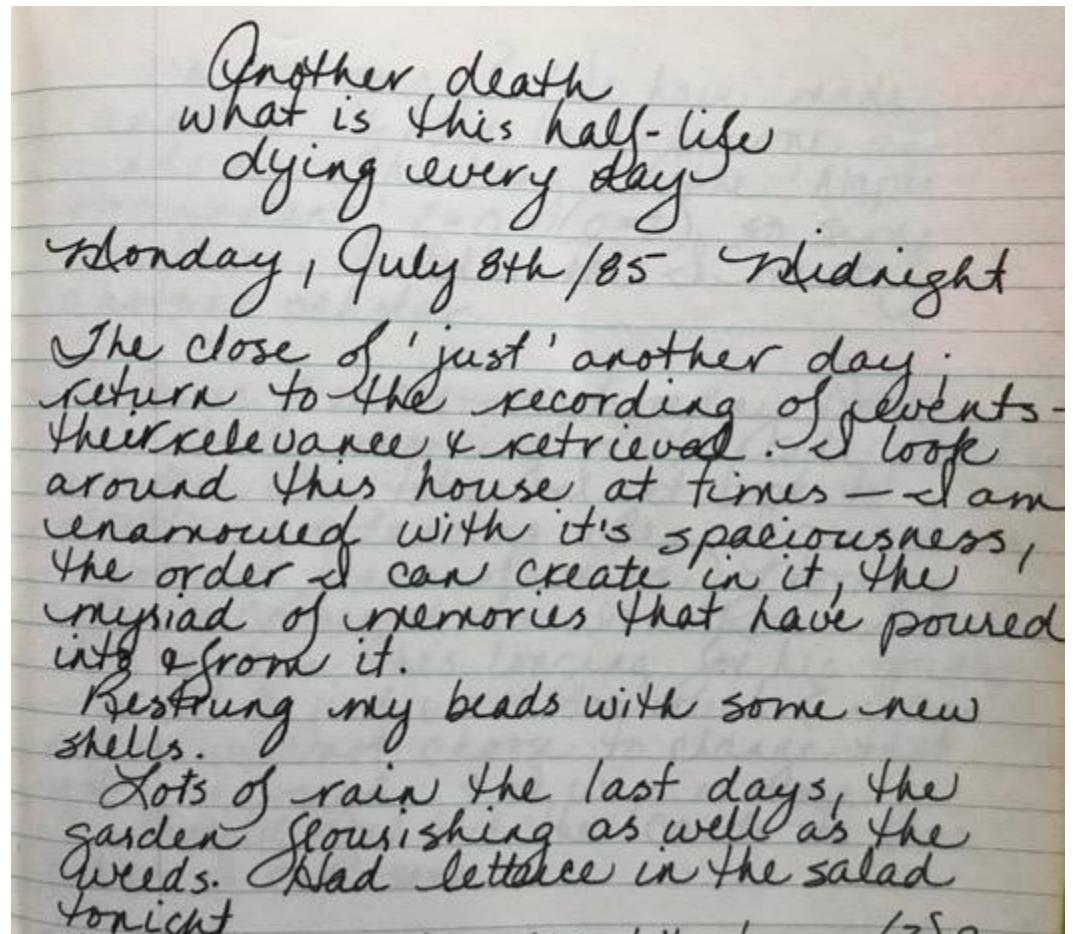
Thursday 8:00am~last day of June. 7:15 departure reminds me of the first day of kindergarten. The day is magnificent, the quality of the morning light cloud & clear sky, fresh cool and bright. Flowers on the table, a cereal box, a crumpled table cloth, a candle lit morning ritual.

Which Lily doesn't know how to interpret. On the one hand, she is written about. Her name put down in black flowing ink. Her 4000km bus departure away from home recorded for posterity. A child on the first day of her great education. But on the other hand, she is sandwiched between Mrs. Ramsey's birthday and an obscure esoteric book. A cool, clear sky.

Did her mother care so little for her? Or did she, with elegant, unwavering hand, record her ability to find her own way in the world?

*

At a Bad Babysitter meeting, Lily hears a man talk about *letting this cup pass*, and her ears perk up. His name is Norm, and he's been a person who does not do *the thing* for a hundred years. He self-describes as a former ass-hole, a man who came from hell and lived in hell; a man who spent his family's grocery money; a man who knew only how to work and fight; a man, who, once he reached his bottom, found life, found love. Now, his four kids and seven grandkids know only the loving Norm. The Norm *who does not do the thing*. Lily knows his story because he recites practically these same words every week, every week the same message, telling his story to inspire newcomers that they, too, can recover from *doing a thing*, that a life is possible, even if you never knew one to begin with. Even if you came from the saddest, most fucked-up family like he did. This night, Norm is sad and anxious. His cancer has returned, his already-lean face is gaunt with chemo, and when he speaks, his lips tremble.



Another death
what is this half-life
dying every day

Monday, July 8th /85 Midnight

The close of 'just' another day;
return to the recording of events -
their relevance & retrieval. I look
around this house at times - I am
enamoured with it's spaciousness,
the order I can create in it, the
myriad of memories that have poured
into & from it.

Restrung my beads with some new
shells.

Lots of rain the last days, the
garden flourishing as well as the
weeds. Had lettuce in the salad
tonight.

Later, when Lily is at home, she pulls out Mrs. Ramsey's King James version of the bible and looks up the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane:

And he went a little farther, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt. (Mathew 26: 39).

Mathew is describing Jesus, who has learned that he is to die on the cross the next morning. Clearly, he'd prefer not to. In Norm's version of the parable, it was possible to ask of God even the impossible. The trick was that you had to accept what you received—as *Thou wilt*. Lily is not a Christian. She's not even religious. But she prays anyway. *Let this cup pass*.

A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in cursive and includes the date 'Thurs July 185 Noon' and a prayerful statement about finding a cottage for rent in Southhampton. There is a small mark resembling 'JMA' in the top right corner of the paper.

*

It's January. She gets a phone call. But she misses it, and it goes to voicemail. She doesn't see it until she gets home in the evening. It's the clinic in Castlegar, calling to remind

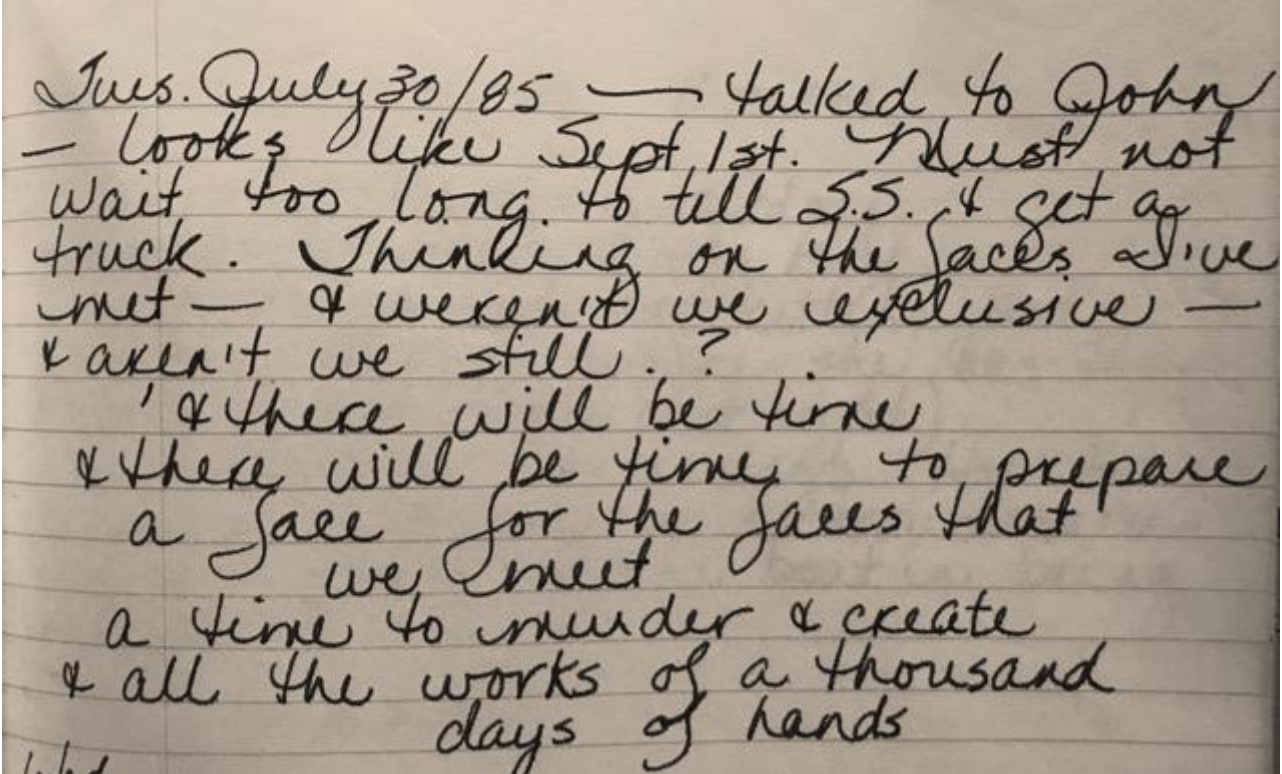
James of his appointment. Lily messages James. Hey, clinic called about your appt. Tues. 10:45. Chat later about our visit over reading break? Luv u <3

A few weeks later, Lily and James are skiing. It's a brilliantly sunny day, and the air is cold and crisp. William, Lily's partner, and she have arrived from the coast, for a 5-day visit.

James seems well. He's back at school, a bit skinny, but he seems okay. They don't talk about what happened in December, but it pops up in references that are sudden and jarring and only tangentially related to what they're doing. On a walk to the store one snowy evening to buy cheezies, there is joke about the catheter. Another time, as they're settling in to watch a movie, a recollection of the first moments of waking up. He'd motioned for a pen, and Lily searched around the small room and finding one, placed it between his fingers. In shaky letters he wrote, *Accident?* She shook her head, no. *Fire?* he whispered hoarsely. No, she said.

Each morning of their visit, before they head out on some adventure, they stop at the Pharmasave where James gets his dose of *the legal thing*.

Earlier, Lily had asked James why he doesn't give his own home number to the clinic. James tells her that if the clinic knew he was living with another person who does



Tues. July 30/85 — talked to John
— looks like Sept 1st. Must not
wait too long to tell S.S. & get a
truck. Thinking on the faces I've
met — & weren't we exclusive —
& aren't we still?
' & there will be time
& there will be time to prepare
a face for the faces that
we meet
a time to murder & create
& all the works of a thousand
days of hands

the *legal thing*, that might exclude him from the *legal-thing* program. As it is, he must travel the 60km to Castlegar every day to receive his dose at the Pharmasave. He has weekly appointments at the clinic, and if he misses an appointment or if any of his blood tests come back showing he's doing any *other things*, he'll be dropped from the program. The upside to being on the *legal-thing*? James tells her: he's not spending all this student loan money on *things*. Also, he feels more level, fewer ups and downs. In the past, he was high days he had *the thing* and then sick for many more when he didn't have it. Now he's more even. It's easier to get school work done. And over time, the buzz he gets from the *legal-thing* will wear off. He'll feel normal. Whatever that is. The irony of legal versus illegal is lost on no one.

Maybe, he says, he'll even be able to come back to the Island, live with Lily and William and go to university? Everyone nods their heads and thinks to the future.

The downside to the *legal-thing* is that it's easy to overdose on. It's very long-lasting—so if you take too much, you're going down for a very long time. Maybe you'll never get up. The upside, of course, is that you know what you're getting. The *legal things* are not contaminated with deadly poisons.

There are more downsides, too, but Lily don't want to intervene too much. Force her opinion. She could say something and it would be the wrong advice, and something terrible could happen. On a mother's advice, a son could be urged to do something—take an introductory course in philosophy, not take *the legal thing* and go cold turkey, or get a job as a dishwasher at a pizza and pasta joint—and any one of these things could lead to a son making a fatal error—ingesting a toxic *illegal thing* to deal with the pressure of the expectations of “ordinary life”—and dying. The range of possible outcomes is exponential and terrifying. What chaos she could set in

motion with well-meaning advice. She's happy that James is taking care of his health. He's seeing a doctor; he's in communication with health professionals every day of the week. He's twenty-three. She lets him make decisions he thinks are good for him.

This morning, they've driven up the highway toward Salmo, up the Bombi Pass, and turned off on a snow-covered gravel road. Under the hydro lines, they find tracks made by snowmobiles. William heads off ahead, sailing up the hill with ease, with James and Lily slowly bringing up the rear. William has rented James touring gear, so they can go anywhere they want: up, across, down, over, beside, between. It's a little exciting to be able to grip the snow with the skis and soar up the hill. Lily lets James go ahead of her so she can check his progress, and after a little time, she can see he is sweating and puffing. It's *the thing*, he says, weakly. They've upped his dose today. He feels a little dizzy. Lily suggests a break, and they spread their jackets on the snow. The snow sparkles, and apart from a gentle wind, there is no sound. James lays out spread-eagle, his head on his pack, sunglasses over his eyes, face to the brilliant sun. Lily looks up the slope toward William, who is blithely hammering away at the hill. It's hard to see where they're going. There aren't very many trees. It's quite open here actually, though she doesn't really have a map in her mind of where this path goes, or how long they'll be out here. But she brought some snacks and they have a thermos of hot chocolate. You okay now? Lily asks. Ya, James says with a smile. I'm good.

*

Ground midnight — & so it ends as
it began. A hassle for real. And now
it seems we both know how impossible
this all is. You roaring, us both
screaming the words. I have no tears
perhaps I have none left. Brandon
sleeps beside me. I will not cry. Is it
a stoic I have become? I tell myself
it's alright it doesn't really matter.
I don't really hate them all, I just
can't be with them. I have my children
to consider — speaking of consideration.
I am a widow, I weep I grieve.
Then grieve no more Palomina
Then grieve no more Palomina
Then grieve no more Palomina

She had been born with one name,
and then she was given another. Or was it
the other way around? That afternoon in
the hospital. Help, she'd begged them.
Stop screaming, they said. It will be easier
for you. And then after puffing up her
cheeks and bearing down, sliding out of
her came her name: *mom, mother, mumma,*
the mother of James.

And if James were not here, if

James stops being her son, if the thin line of his life ends, what will become of her name?

The certain thoughts that refuse to be unthought. You did it to yourself. A *thing that was done with one's own hand. In one's own hand.* If it was dark, and you took your hand, and in your own hand, your hand did a thing, your name could be someone else's. It could be anyone's. You could be spoken

*

James sits in the car with his eyes open. For the first time since Lily hurried him into the car that morning, he seems alert. Do you want some of this? he asks. He offers Lily a crumpled package—half the muffin she bought him. Thanks, Lily says, smiling at him. It was possible they were going to make it. If traffic was light, they would make Hope by noon. There's a gas station there that they always stop at. Beyond Hope stretches a landscape of mountains and rivers and lakes that they will have to cross. They have the secret underwear, the eyeshadow, the glasses, a jar of peanut butter, a loaf of bread, a hunk of cheese, and the peaches the Lily canned last summer. James seems older somehow, as if travelling across the water has aged him. Lily feels changed somehow, too. Between the time of picking her pen up and putting it down, years have passed. Over their long passage, she has seen herself divided by two indistinct possibilities: a life with James, and a life without him. Rising up in defense of James, his body, and lying down in grief, letting the black water wash over her. The ages-old question about whether she should write about him, about herself, becomes a story she has read. "She had been looking at" the black sea, "and it had flashed upon her that" it is not she who is telling, but she who is being told, "and she had felt an enormous exultation."

And Lily saw that Thoth had made the word for the purpose of communing with the dead, and for guiding people from this world to the other. In some stories, the sky is the body of a gigantic woman stretched above the horizon. Her two legs and two arms, which reach down to earth, comprise the four pillars of heaven. Her body is decorated with stars. Each morning, the newly born sun travels along her body and disappears into her mouth, to be re-born the following morning. Under this woman's body is another, smaller woman, and she is also outstretched. Her body is decorated with small disks. And from her, the moon is born, which travels along her body and disappears into her mouth. Between them are stars. Under the two women, a god lies on the ground looking upward. His one

arm reaches for the women's feet, and his other arm reaches for their hands, and he holds a disk in each hand. His body is bent round to form a kind of circle, so that his feet stretch over his head and rest behind him on the earth. This space, where the presence of one body could be read as the end of another body, shows where the dead live.

Ping.

*

Mon. Sept. 2nd /85 10:40 PM —
Southampton, 30 Archibald Pl.
Back broken. School tomorrow AM
with the boys. It's alot of excitement
hope I feel better - soon I check
my bruises & remember; replay it
endlessly. It's a good thing I have
lots to do - this shifting & reordering
I can hear the boys in their new
bunks - still restless
I gaze long in vision (~~at~~) at
wonder ~~at~~ (with) these ways
Caught in my own trap
I pray for some sort of strength
I do not know yet or have
forgotten
I dread the morrow
But I am only tired & sore
& need to rest.

My first introduction. (Think of Sinclair Lewis' 'Mainstreet' a good deal.

> Just the sound of the wind in the trees & this noisy old fridge. Bridges & I don't seem to do very well. How nice state of the art things are. The house-cottage is coming together. Still haven't got the TV or the stereo hooked up, or any blinds or curtains — hesitate putting mega holes in John's new walls. My back still very sore. Should've gone in swimming with the boys.

Q not so gentle & almost all of the junction on a level; & some my what's to come. & the water was

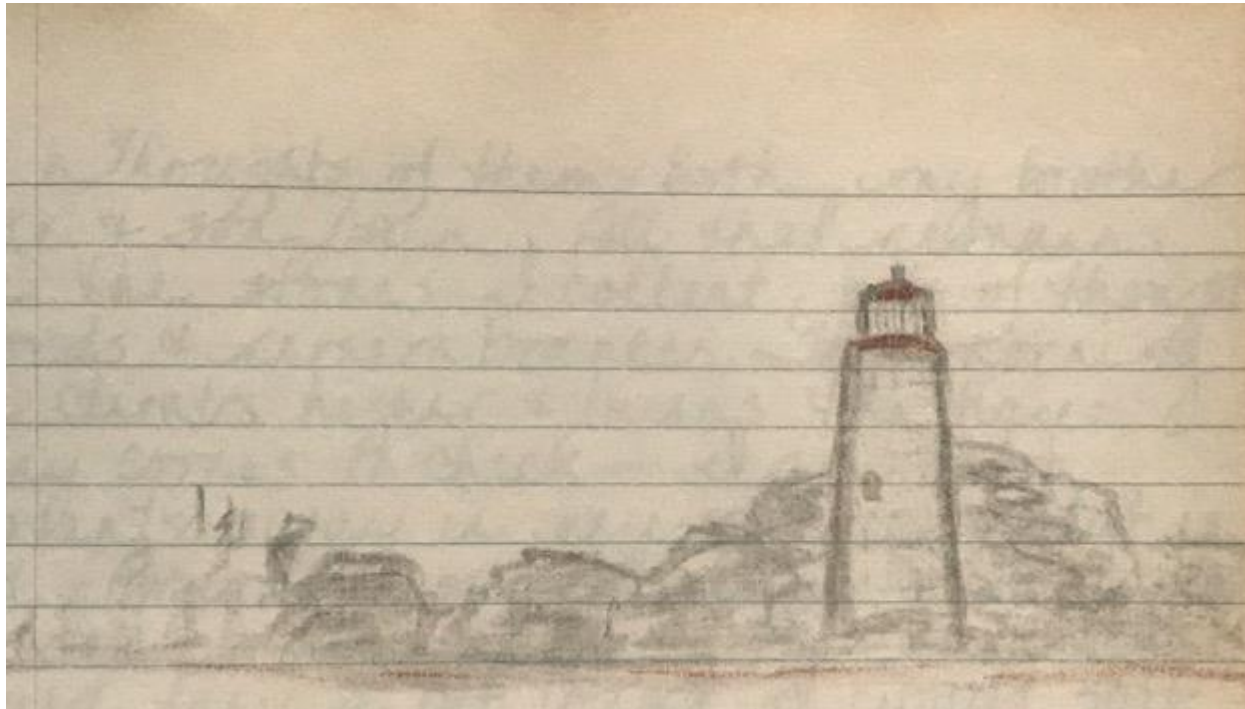
gone in swimming with the boys. Q not so gentle. Reminder. Spend almost all of the day in reflection as junction on a seemingly different level; & some moments of wondering what's to come. And the wind not

The water washed me clean across the lake there is a lighthouse

Almost a sense of déjà vu this having arrived & what to do
sanctuary - my cottage
in the wood

Wed. 7:00 PM — 'till human voices wake us and we drown.'

The fridge & the radio turned off I listen to the evening sounds



Section Two: Rubric

The dying are outcasts because they are deviants in an institution organized by and for the conservation of life; [they] confront the living against the voice that would break out of this enclosure to cry: 'I am going to die'

Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

For very little is known about women.

Virginia Woolf, *Women and Fiction*



When my son was little, I had an old silver Subaru that had a lever on the dash which, when raised with my index finger while I pushed on the gas pedal, made the car lift off the ground, so that we were flying. Writers, like drivers, like parents, hold a lot of power. I have worried that, as a memoir writer, not only do I risk harming those I write about by betraying their privacy and autonomy, but I do so from a tyrannical and monological subject position.



For this reason, this project presents infelicitous performances of parenting—specifically, mothering—because, like Judith Butler demonstrates, as “imitations which effectively displace the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself” (2386). It should be understood that this project is not an examination of identity for the reason that identity is discursive. I am not telling my story—I am being storied. *My* story is no less than what Fredric Jameson refers to as the “always-already-read” (1734). However, it was Michel Foucault who said, “*everything* is never said” (118). I take this to mean that, while experiences are manifold, expressions of those experiences tend to coalesce around a limited number of discursive forms. Sadly, about “addiction” and “mothering,” I am almost assured to essentialize the very things I wish to uniquely reveal.

Against this impossibility, I hurl
the tools at my disposal:
**parataxis, intertextuality, an
unreliable narrator,** and the
explosion of a number of
**addiction and mothering
tropes.**





PARATAXIS

One of my central tools has been parataxis. Aristotle describes parataxis pejoratively as “free-running” and thus lacking “natural stopping places that are satisfying and definite” (153). He says, it is “unsatisfactory to see nothing in front of you and get nowhere” (153). Whereas, with periodic language “the hearer always feels that he is grasping something and has reached some definite conclusion” (153). I have purposely worked against Aristotle’s notion of “getting somewhere” as a goal of my narrative. Rather, I hope to embrace gaps, holes, voids—between image and text, among narratives—precisely because they resist conclusions, and more so, because doing so makes space for a new spatial relationality.



When my mother died in 2015, I took on some of her concerns. A gap might be seen to exist between the experiences of our lives. Between mine and my son's. Between Virginia Woolf, Lily Briscoe, and Mrs. Ramsey's. Taking my cue from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work in *Touching Feeling*, this project explores that gap as a way of experiencing the *besideness* of our lives. I have put things side by side, eliding, alluding, honouring the gap, and yet suggesting a collaborative relationality.



In *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick says,

“*Beside* is an interesting preposition also because there’s nothing very dualistic about it; a number of elements may lie alongside one another, though not an infinity of them. *Beside* permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking: noncontradiction or the law of the excluded middle, cause versus effect, subject versus object. ...the irreducibly spatial positionality of *beside* also seems to offer some useful resistance to the ease with which *beneath* and *beyond* turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos” (8).

I like to think that *besideness* allows me to express such positionality—intimate yet distant, different yet similar—*among* narratives, *between* text and image, and even *at the level of* the sentence. A radical *besideness* could be said to exist where one subject performs the verb of a second subject. Where one subject enacts the narrative of a second subject. Or even where one subject takes the name of a second subject.





Simply put, the more I put things beside each other, the more they seemed to breach the gap that death, subjectivity, and narrative impose. The gap between autobiography and fiction. Between self and other. *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf's most autobiographical work, can be read as an elegy to her parents. Like my mother, Woolf and many writers and authors of her time became interested in pre-Hellenistic Egypt. My Mrs. Ramsey, whose journals are filled with references to Thoth, Isis, Horus and lighthouses, stands beside Woolf's Mrs. Ramsey, in whose "chambers of the mind and heart, were stood, like treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything" (Woolf 48). And everyone converges upon *the* lighthouse—either arriving, departing, or simply passing by.



[her lighthouse, their lighthouse, our lighthouse]

The great Pharos Lighthouse, iconic symbol of the port city of Alexandria, built by the Greek ruler Ptolemy II in 323-290 BCE.

Such *besideness* in narrative technique, though post-modern in feel, has ancient correspondence. However, to those used to the European system of perspective, the Egyptian aspective view can seem unnatural. As Davies points out,

“Egyptian paintings are in the first instance informative, and only secondarily impressionistic in intention. The conception of art as the revelation of individual and inspired ways of seeing the world around us was wholly alien to ancient thought. Its purpose was to show things, not as the artist’s eye saw them, but as they are in reality. And this was achieved by delineating the separate parts one at a time, each as accurately as possible, but not coordinated with one another nor as seen from one and the same angle. In fact, Egyptian drawing bears a close analogy to writing, in which each of the more important elements in a complex situation is presented to the reader in a separate word and in sequence, to him being left the task of combining the whole in his mind, i.e. of understanding the sense” (xxix)



Prompted by Sedgwick's notions of "textural perception" and the question such perception invokes—"How did it get that way? and What could I do with it?" (13)—I began to think of my project, with its various surfaces, as a manifestation of my narrators' wishes to make something of their concerns, and to bring that thing forth to the public. That is, to publish.

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INTERTEXTUALITY

I began this project with an
about myself and yet protect
my family. I wanted to write
there is a lot of confusion:
what kinds of questions are
experience of “mothering”?
“addiction,” and what kinds
ways of thinking about that?



ethical problem: how to write
the privacy and autonomy of
about topics around which
just what is a mother, and
necessary to think about the
As well, I wondered, *what is*
of questions can lead to new

I had tried writing about both these topics in the past, and I found the results unsatisfactory. I was merely repeating tropes, notions, phrases, gestures. I discovered I could say nothing new. Narrative, it seemed, worked against my purposes.

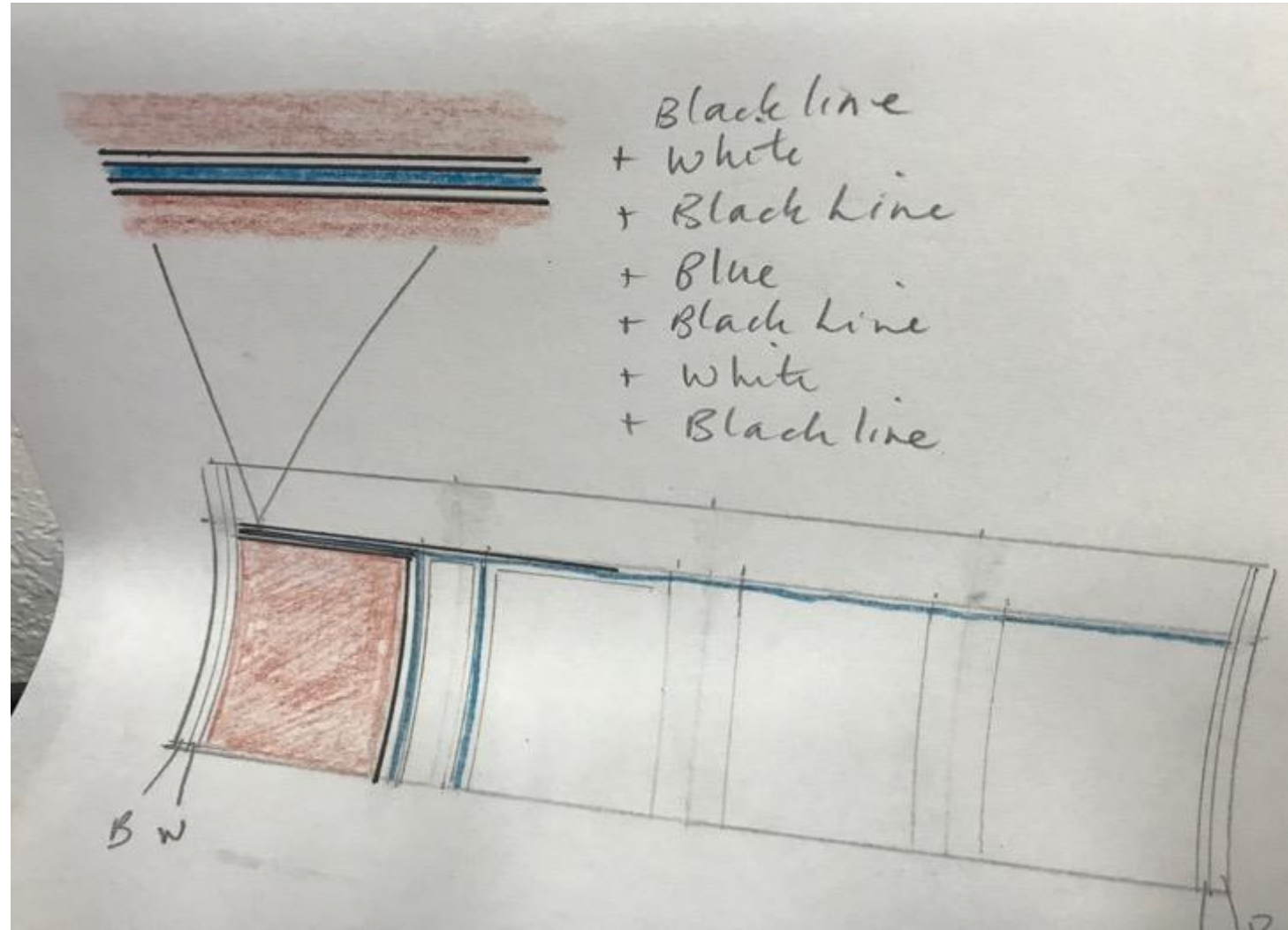
I composed a manuscript, which I sent to an agent. His response, while hurtful, was helpful. He told me he “grew bored” of my story. That I needed to write “scenes” in which “things happen.” That his caring about the mother and son in my manuscript was based on “things happening.”

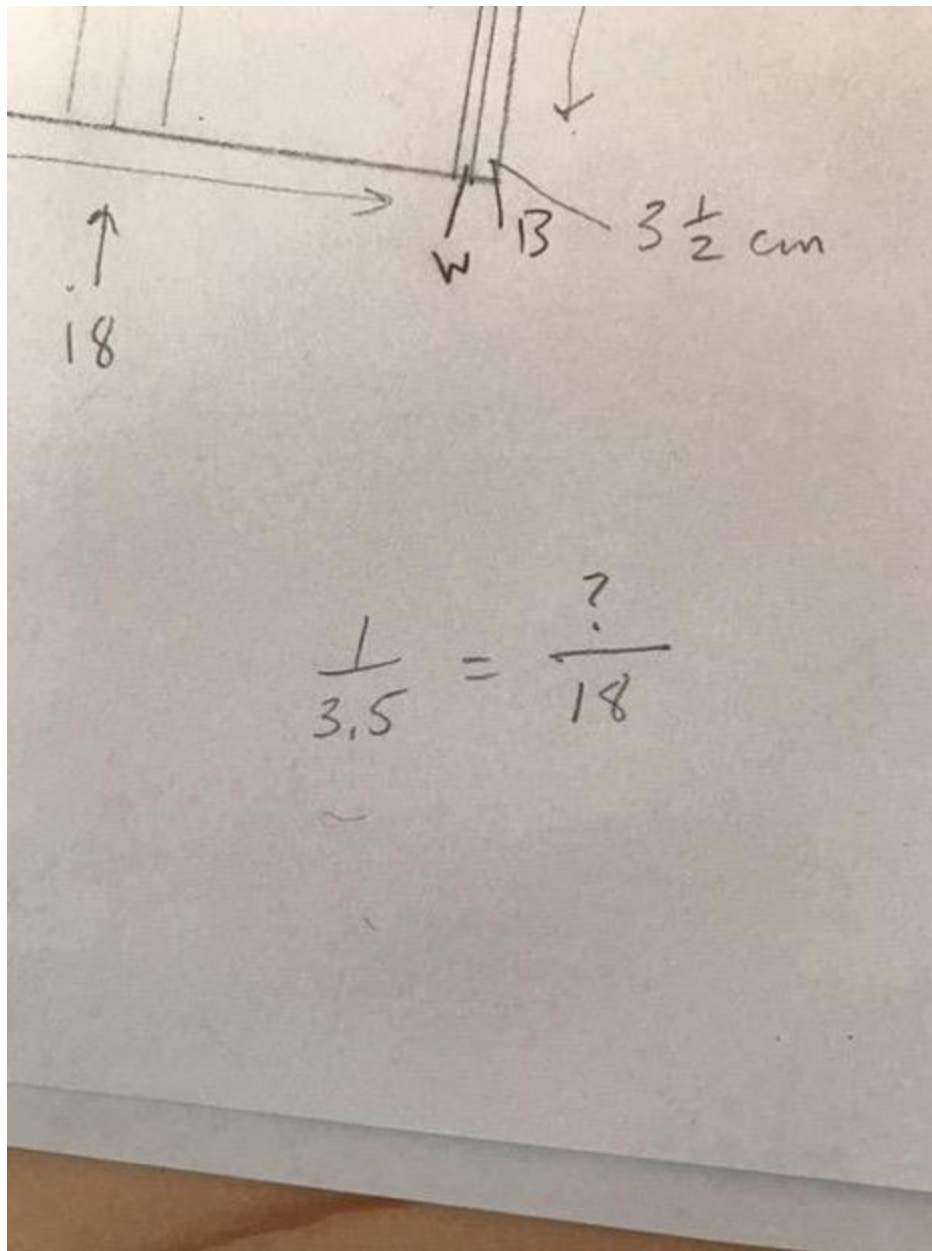


And yet, how could I communicate that a major part of the experience I was trying to relate entailed precisely things *not* happening. Really, nothing was changing. I was going on being a mother; my son was going on being a son; the dead were going on being dead. In the years I had been living my experience, things were pretty much the same. Sure, I knew what he meant. He wanted those harrowing scenes in which things happen. He wanted a *story*, one that would sell. His advice was bitter medicine for me. I would not, and I could not, write the way he wanted me to write, for I knew deep down that there was no reason to write that way.

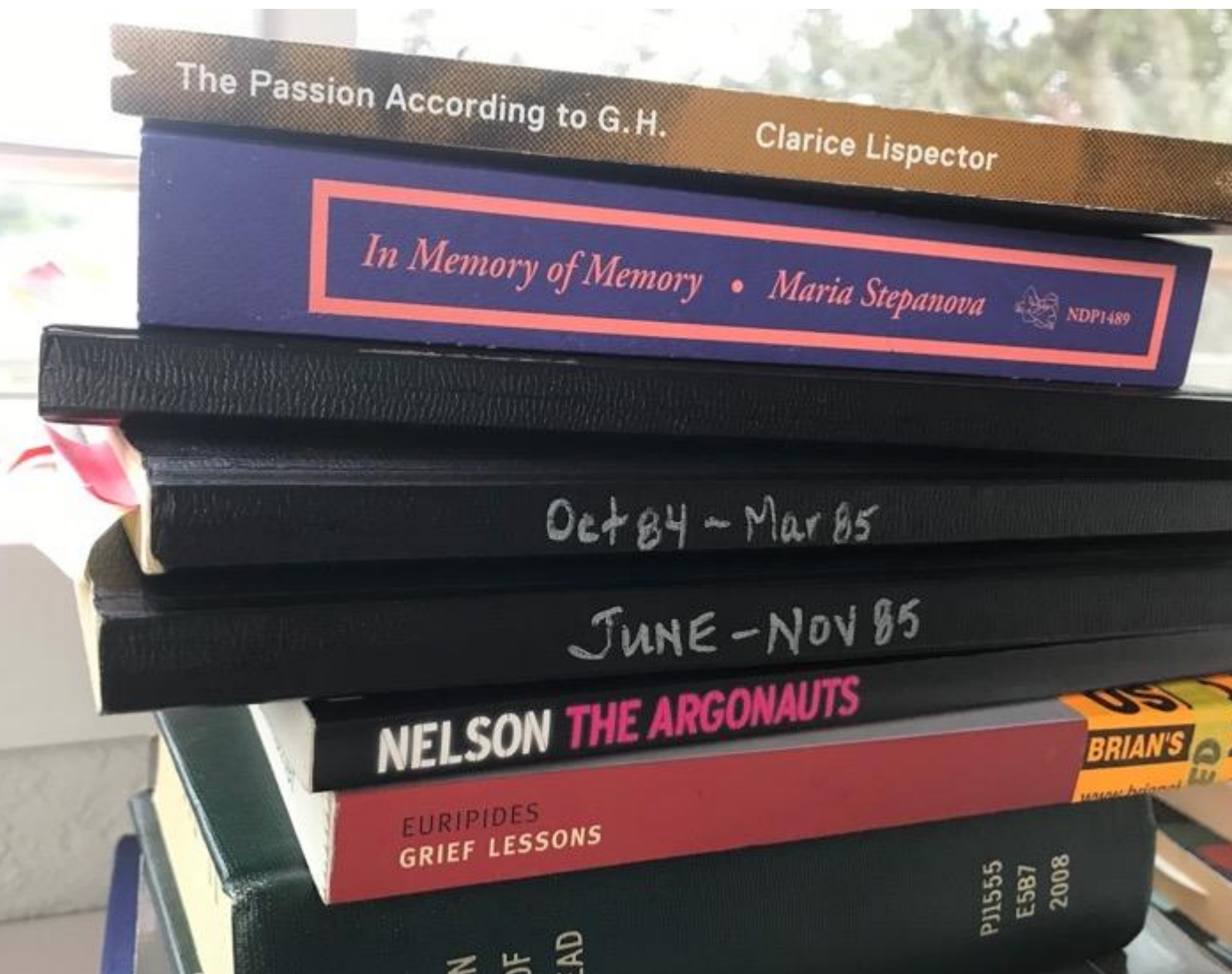


The problem that I had with form mirrored the fact that I also did not know how to “mother.” It seemed I should know how to behave. My culture tells me I should know how to behave. I came to see that I was having, according to the Marxist aesthetics of Frederic Jameson, an ideological crisis of form (“On Interpretation” 1739), which could be articulated by a resolving contradiction, a productive heteroglossia, a symbolic act of magic.





I needed help. So, I turned to an old friend from Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe, who is told, "Women can't paint, women can't write" (Woolf 46). A book in which ten years pass in the telling of a single trip to a lighthouse. Perhaps it could be enough to write about a mother and son's voyage on a ferry that culminates in almost arriving at a gas station in Hope.



I thought, if she keeps painting, and I keep writing, one of us will come up with something. We will see something in a certain way—move the salt cellar onto a flower in the pattern on the table cloth, and something will flash up on us, and we will have our “vision” (Woolf 226).

UNRELIABILITY

My **narrator** is *beside herself*. Baffled, bewildered, at-a-loss, she is more-than-herself but also not-herself, and for this reason, she presents neither/not only a coherent single story, nor/but also one that could be called true/truly her own. The characters in my story are incautious, in-exact women, some of whom are mothers. Mostly, they're doing it (whatever they're doing) "badly." They're going round, circling back; viewed in a brief time frame, you could even say they're failing. A lot of the time, they're simply unlearning what it is they were "supposed" to do.





Most often when we speak about unreliable narrators, we understand them as characters who do not know themselves or do not understand their own motives; there are those, too, who purposely lie to the reader; others, too, who lie to themselves. In truth, my narrators are most unreliable because, on their own, they have no one upon whom to rely.



I came across the writing of this work *by accident*. Something had *happened*. Someone had died. Someone would die. And I could possibly have a hand in that, for the difference between saving and abandoning was unclear to me. Between describing and performing even less so. The things I did and said could harm. A sense of crisis was imminent. Which is to say, I did not purposely set out to write this work but was compelled by a painful sense of what I should not do. What I should not write.

Which leads me to speak about time. In my endeavour to describe a story in which not much happens, I wish to invoke a rather unreliable sense of time. An uncertainty about when the story is taking place. A layering, a vertical *besideness* that heaps events upon each other, during which it is not always obvious that things are happening. A sense of time that exceeds a single life time, one that places a life upon another, a lying down atop one another, a collective weight that merges and cements the individuals and leaves an impression.



Mikhail Bakhtin says, “truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between* people collectively searching for a truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” (110). In this project, I have gathered together several unreliable narrators, women who are unsure about their place in the world or even what they think. Together they strive toward a collective truth.

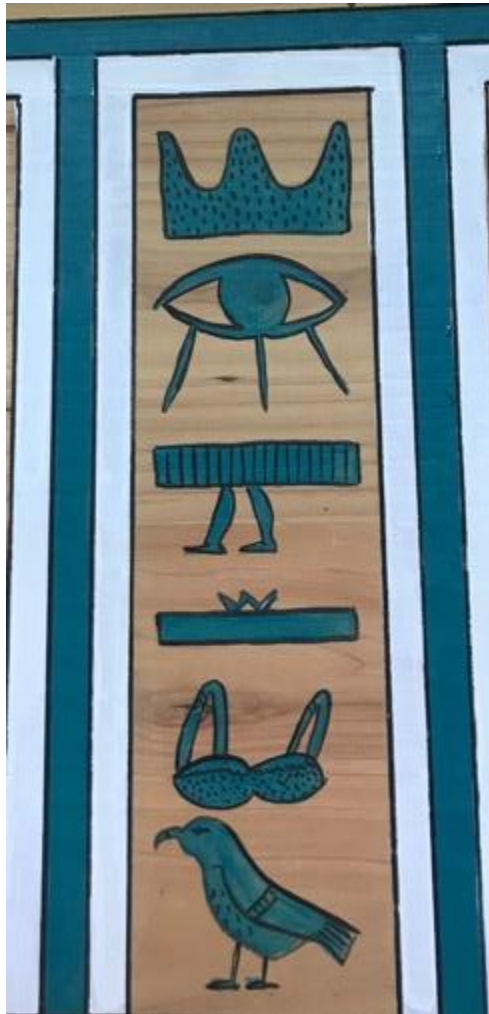


TROPES

About “addiction” and “mother” tropes, I have tried to plumb the depths, squeezing out new material from an accumulation of dead ideas. Of the blemish, the lurid, the zombie, the spectre, I have made a spectacle. I confess that it is both easy and pleasing to pop the pimple of prejudice, to reveal the maternal form as clothed in restrictive habits, show a little leg. It was harder to understand the narrative itself as a sort of trope. If I was going to avoid essentializing either mothers or people who use drugs, I would have to enlist the power of the narrative to become conscious of itself.



Reading my mom's journals beside my story helped me to understand why I had labeled her as a "bad mother." She had wanted a life



of study, of passion, of knowledge, and as a single mother with three kids, that was a life she could not attain. All I knew as a child was my rather grown-up judgment of her and her lifestyle. As a parent, I made decisions in reaction to that old judgment—I would be the "good mother," though of course I had both the rocky start and exhibited the same poor planning as my mother, and I, too, would come to understand myself as a "bad mother."

By arranging a selection of my mother's journal entries within my narrative, I could both fulfil her desire to be published and create an opportunity for her to rescue her children. I could stop trying to be so "good." And I could save my son by abandoning him within a fiction, within a myth, in a mimetic underworld where he might live on despite what happened in the real world, and where he might be protected from my selfish desire to paint and write. Likewise, I could bring Lily Briscoe into a future where her mourning of the mother-figure of Mrs. Ramsey is complicated by my mother's "badness," and Lily might understand that her inability—women's ability—to paint

and write, unfortunately, would not be resolved by the singular "vision" she attains in her novel in 1927.

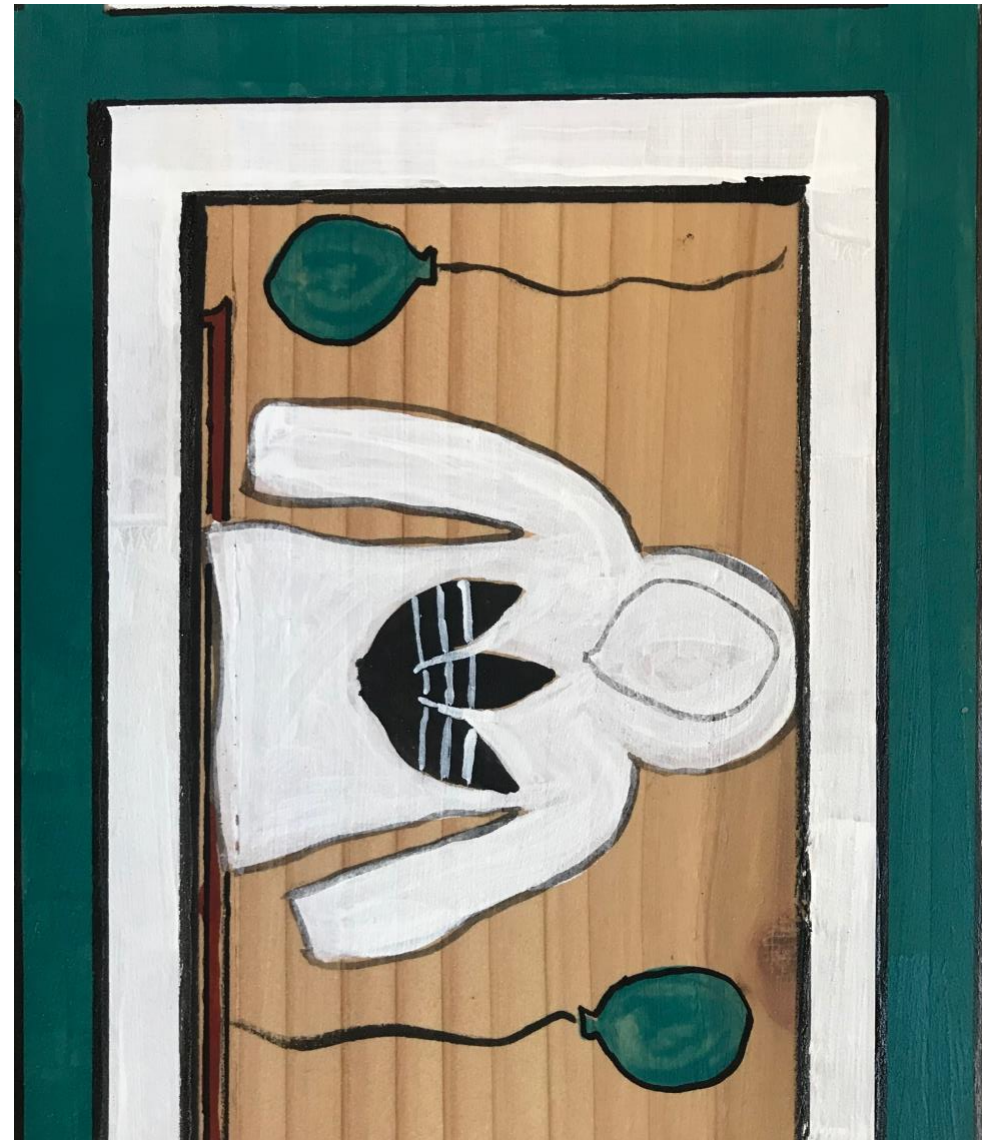


Together, these women could help me to talk back to the interpellation of “Good Mother,” a behaviour and an identity which reinscribes the kind of essentialism I aim to avoid. In Julie Leavitt’s work about “The Bad Enough Mother,” she argues that “a mother’s interpellation of gender is an echoed call to resistance against society’s interpellation of mother” (58). Mothers have been too-good. It turns out that, not only does “bad mothering” *not* harm children, but it protects them from the essentializing forces of patriarchy and colonialism and teaches them the language of talking back. I have my mother’s misbehaviour to thank for this insight, and it only became clear to me via a consciousness that emerged in the work when it saw itself as a collaborative project, and when it performed “mothering” and “addiction” as varieties of human experience and not as static identities.

One notion that I have not adequately explored is the false narrative that all people who use drugs are drug addicts, or even that to be addicted to drugs is “bad.” There is no room in that clichéd narrative for the possibility that people who use drugs may not want or need to stop using drugs; that is, there exists an assumption that not taking drugs is the default, normative, desirable, and therefore good state, and all people who use drugs should want to be “good.”

I read once that addiction narratives make terrible stories, circling as they tend to, diving now into drug use and the harrowing, and rising now to the surface, sanity, clarity, hope, and then back down into the harrowing again. I have attempted to both evoke and resist this narrative movement. A day in which nothing happens allows those who fear death the illusion of tomorrow; it offers people who use drugs the opportunity to resist the popular and all-pervasive judgement that they

must change, that they must desist using drugs and become normal, that they must not die.



Framing myself within this addiction narrative produces a damning appraisal of my own denial—a denial that I am going to die, that to love means to lose. Neither of these truths has anything to do with drugs. Or even particularly with mothering. Rather, they are the human experience.

An early draft title of this manuscript was titled simply, Katabasis, for I understood the arc of the journey of the narrative to be one of a coming down, or a coming home. A descent. And I imagined this as a descent into an underworld, where the mother in my manuscript takes the son to save him. But strictly speaking, that would more accurately describe a return to the sea **from** the mountains than a journey from an island **to** the mountains. Also, such a movement would describe a journey from east to west, and indeed, in the ancient Egyptian Osirian myths, it's westward that one goes to follow the father.





The deceased would leave the tomb during the day, join Ra in the solar bark as it makes its westward journey across the sky, come back to his tomb at night and rejuvenate through his Osirian form in the form of a mummy (Oriental Institute).

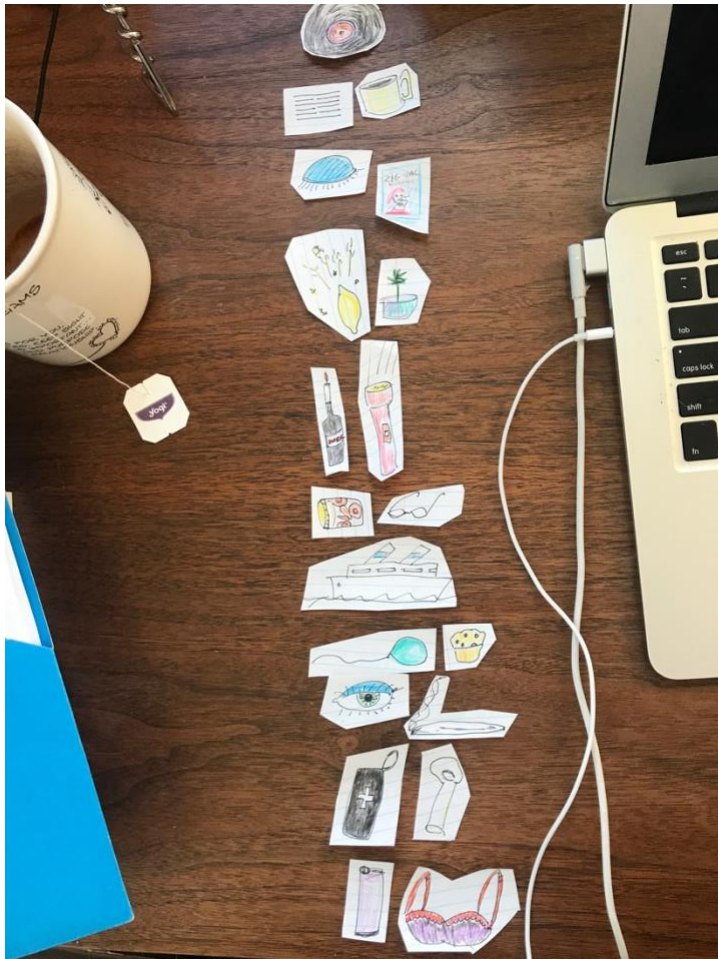
My connection to Pre-Hellenistic Egyptian myth and funerary practices I owe to my mother and Mrs. Ramsey, though perhaps it could be said that I took the study in a slightly different direction than those two guides. The more I read about the Egyptian culture and practice of writing, language, and literature, the more I saw correspondence with my own project.

In Pre-Hellenistic Egyptian, there was no single concept for *mother* in hieroglyphic form. Rather,



there were variations of the determinant sign of seated woman  that produced such diverse logograms as “pregnant woman,” “woman giving birth,” “woman suckling child,” and “queen wearing diadem and holding a flower.” A good way to understand the determinant  is that it can signify a variety of roles and experiences for women, a few of which are “woman in feminine role” (*st*), “Goddess” (*ntrt*), “daughter” (*sꜣt*), “widow” (*hꜣrt*), “singer” (*schm-ayt*) or the feminine pronoun, *I* (*j*) (Gardiner 448). Indeed, according to Dynastic Egyptian culture scholars, Brewer and Teeter, “the word used to designate “mother” was also used for “grandmother,” and the word for “father” was the same as “grandfather”; likewise, the terms for “son,” “grandson,” and “nephew” (or “daughter,” “granddaughter,” and “niece”) were identical. “Uncle” and “brother” (or “sister” and “aunt”) were also designated by the same word” (130)

This ancient understanding not only troubles our contemporary concept of *mother*, but explains why in the Osiris story cycles, Isis is sometimes described as Osiris’s sister and sometimes as his wife.



As his wife/mother, Isis is charged with locating and recombining Osiris's dismembered body parts after they are strewn apart by his brother/enemy Set, and it is on this story that Ancient Egyptian funerary practices—which place extreme reverence on the preservation and integrity of the dead body—are based.

Beginning in the Old Kingdom (2664-2155 BCE), the corpses of royals were embalmed with drugs and spices, anointed in aromatic oils, swaddled in hundreds of meters of linen, enveloped in sarcophagi, and laid deep inside caverns cut out of the bowels of mountains (Budge xi). Texts aiding them in reaching the afterlife were inscribed on tomb walls, which were then sealed up for eternity.

Beginning in period of the middle Kingdom (2154-1845 BCE), guided passage to the afterlife was for the first time available to non-royals. Some scholars refer to this as the democratization of the afterlife (Lesko 2); where previously only royals could be guided to from this world to the next via pyramid texts—coffin texts and texts written on papyrus meant that “anyone who could afford them” (Lesko 2) could for the first time receive guidance to the next world.

Such funerary texts, known since the 19th century as *The Book of the Dead*, do not actually comprise a single book and are



more aptly described as a compilation of genres: spells, maps, hymns, litanies, and magical formulae. Versions of this compilation that were printed on scrolls of papyrus and on the inside and outside of coffins are referred to as Coffin Texts.

These texts have neither a common author nor are they canonical (Oriental Institute). More of a description, (though a more apt title) *Spells of Going forth by Day* can be applied to a number of texts.

The production of such texts—whether written on papyrus or inscribed on coffins—required the work of a number of highly skilled artisans. There were those who produced the papyrus and formed the scrolls, and those who hewed the wood and constructed the coffins. There were those, too, who painted and inscribed images. And finally, there were those who could both read and write

hieroglyphs and the cursive script of heretic and, later, demotic, and they wrote the texts. We know that the texts and the images were inscribed at separate times and by different people because of errors made in placing images (Oriental Institute). Artists sometimes put images in the wrong place because they could not read the text, which was written by scribes in an older, grammatically different language than the artists' (Oriental Institute).

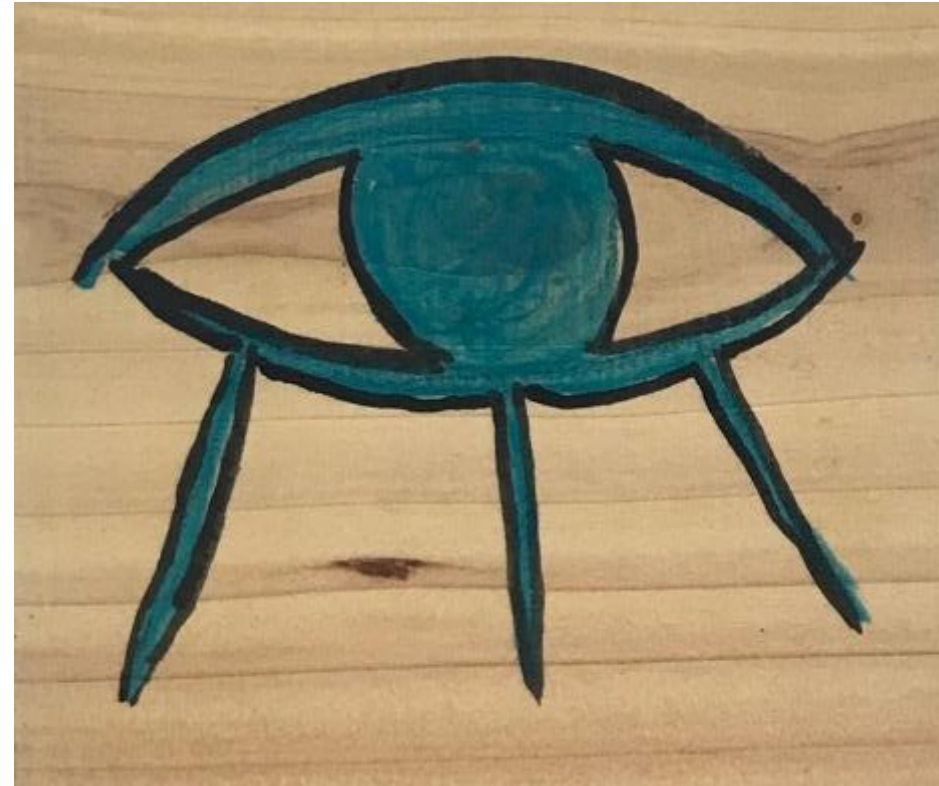


Our notion of a published text as a stable product of a single author meant to be published for anonymous living readers seems a rather paltry project when compared to codices such as Egyptian funereal texts, which were compiled over millennia by a multitude of authors for the exclusive use of a dead person in the attainment of divinity.

Which got me thinking about my own project, and I asked myself whether our modern notion of a narrative acts as a trope to fasten a person to their identity instead of freeing them for eternity.

I have preferred to emulate a more collaborative and assembled textual model, one which via its mimesis introduces the kind of corrosive effects

of an imagined multiplicity of self that Socrates warns about in Book III of *The Republic* (Plato 397d–398b). In this fashion, this project attempts to be what Julia Kristeva refers to as “writing [that] reads another writing, reads itself and constructs itself through a process of destructive genesis” (47). As such, I can confidently say, this is not my story.



Epilogue

It's spring and the morning sun leaves a distorted square of light on the floor. Outside, noisy and alive—war-like jubilation of robins, a dripping, last night's frost melting in the zenithing sun—and inside, aloof and silent, rasping of dust motes. You stretch your legs under the duvet, cramped where you have been sleeping on a couch. You feel both too warm and vaguely swaddled, because you have been sleeping in your clothes, which have become twisted around you during the night. Beside you, the socked feet and panted legs of a young man, asleep, you see with relief. Asleep and breathing under the muffling duvet. It occurs to you to pray though of course you aren't religious, but you do so anyway. The image of the cup—symbol of wishes, heart's desire, baked in the forge of the potter's mind—comes to you now, and you utter the prayer in your inner language. *Let this cup pass.* You want a reality different to the present one with its intimations of mortality. But in a fraction of a second, a surprisingly short time, you hear a distinct response. That in fact, the cup *had been passed.* You are now living in what you asked for. And it comes to you that this is perhaps as good as it will ever get. This here-now is the passed cup.

It's as though this morning, this spring-time, this mountain side, this century and the ones before it are a present that you are passed. Though you caress its surface, it's impossible to tell what's inside from its obscure shape and indeterminate heft. You could pass it on, hoping for something better, and leave with nothing. Or you could stop now, take what you have been given, this moment of infelicity.

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