

Grief Ankle: on Ekphrasis as Feeling through Memory, Medium, and Meeting

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Abstract

This thesis makes the case for ekphrasis – the description of the visual in language – as a three-part model for movement: from origin, accumulation, to release.

The written portion consists of three ekphrastic essays to/about art objects — paintings of mothers, photographs of trans friends as children, and sculptures of unmade beds — sentimental objects, theoretical sources, and dear friends. Each chapter corresponds to each of ekphrasis' three movements, culminating collectively to ekphrastic release. The first chapter establishes ekphrasis' psychoanalytic origin: as ekphrasis repeats the grief of the first loss through mimesis' recall, the memory changes, transforming into a kind of forgiveness. The second chapter builds a theory of trans materiality, in which the orientation/phenomenological “purposefulness” toward a word-object moves the self toward the *self*, and the word-objects accumulate as one's life becomes one's life. The third chapter uses the ekphrasis of accessible text/image description as a scale model for interpersonal world building, an ekphrasis which *does*, which tangibly imagines different intimacies and futures in our co-constructed common grounds.

The project also includes a commissioned performance by the poets Sanna Wani and Elizabeth Mudenyio at Xspace Cultural Centre on March 16, 2024. More information about this performance and its relation to the written thesis can be found in Appendix A's support paper.

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This project is only possible because of the people who taught me that there is a soft round at the edge of the gap. Thank you my Nivi, my Lee, my Trynne. Sanna and Liz. Catherine and Patrick. Andrew, for your entire and immediate yes. Kathy, for the simple, complete, unfathomable generosity of telling me I was in the right place – and then, so many million times, meeting me there.

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¹ Ange Loft, “Remember Like We Do,” in *Indigenous Toronto: Stories That Carry This Place*, (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2021), 17.

The woman approaches the woman. They smile lowly. One lifts a hand as if to a pane of glass, drops it to adjust the microphone. There are two of them, microphones, arched between the two women, one facing each of their cheeks. They flick down, up, their looking the adjustment of a pupil to light. Her hand on her waist, thumb swiping. She presses into her right ear. Her hand over her shoulder. She presses into her right ear. They shudder closer. Adjust. Her hand to her back now, cupping. She lifts her nose. She lifts her nose. She turns and coughs into a thinking fist. They angle their necks. They close out their eyes. Their mouths make the same shape — and meet.

Introduction: A Voice Behind a Fence, Recounting

When a child is born, everything is sense. Engulfed, buzzing yellow, forms amorphous. Until, through a rapid process of pruning and parsing, she associates touch with the edge of herself, sounds and gestures with the calling of meaning. By the end of the first year of life, a hearing monolingual child can differentiate only contrastive – or meaningful – sounds in the language she will come to speak.² This pattern-recognition turned meaning-making is a process of differentiating self from environment. It is also a process of loss.

Linguists have developed ingeniously peripheral paradigms for studying the acquisition of this loss: first habituated to sonic repetition, then exposed to its disruption, children's pupils dilate, their heart rates hop, their eyes turn to the expectation of a clapping rabbit.³ Grief's grammar, too, is both highly structured and perceptibly elusive. Too big to pass through one body at once, it shuttles through pinpoints: a hand choreography, the crack between songs, a pomegranate in a movie scene. A grief ankle.⁴ Our indirect method for analyzing grief ankles' painful symmetries is a written form called ekphrasis.

Ekphrasis is, most basically, the linguistic description of the visual. From the Greek for "out" and "speak," one of its origins is the close description of Ancient epics' shields and urns;⁵ another, its form as a poem-about-art, mirroring a painting's "energeia," or resonant soul.⁶

The sense of ekphrasis we will build in these chapters together is only peripherally related to either of these traditions. Our case studies, mostly plucked from moments of prose, will describe both visual art as well as the edge of rounded belongings – but also dreams, friends, the stilled scene of a memory. They will not serve as examples for literary analysis; instead, the hope is that ekphrasis' degree-separate description might serve as a model for a kind of movement that can be found across all life. Like the movement on August 19, for example, when I woke to a sky the colour of syrup, and set out, the air blue, to follow the sound of drums. In my alley, behind the fence that feeds me my ground apples, the adults were having dinner. One said to another, "There is a scene in the *Lion King*. They roll around and look at each other." Our ekphrasis hopes to cover poems about paintings, narrative trots around archaic shields – but also a voice behind a fence, recounting.

² Janet F. Werker and Richard C. Tees, "Cross-language speech perception: Evidence for perceptual reorganization during the first year of life," *Infant behavior and development* 7, no. 1 (1984): 52.

³ Ibid.

⁴ The summer I hurt my ankle, alone under two paintings (one from when I was 11, one from when I was 19), pink swell and red flare accidentally matching, a half-step out of my mother's house, I cried when I called my brother to tell him. "The tears were about a lot of things," I'd texted Nivi then. "Grief ankle."

⁵ Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: the illusion of the natural sign*. (JHU Press, 2019), 273.

⁶ Emily Bilman, *Modern Ekphrasis* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013), 154.

Murray Krieger's sense of ekphrasis is closest to what we will mean. Pulling from the tradition of ekphrasis about the "mere" object, "often round," a jar turned "highly charged form," Krieger's ekphrasis becomes something of "its own nature," "its own urn," a structurally sound third thing holding the visual and linguistic; holding life and death, "transcend[ing] both."⁷ Whereas WJT Mitchell writes that Krieger's ekphrasis offers a "principle" for "all of literature in miniature," we want to push further, offering its possibility as a model for all of *life* in miniature⁸ – something made of the same rhythms as the sounds of our whole lives, "the movements we all are."⁹ Beyond mere poem, mere parasitic part of the epic, our ekphrasis is the force of a pull that transcends itself.

Our model of ekphrastic movement, laid out point-wise, looks something like this:

1. Something, possibly beloved, possibly a grief ankle, is described.
2. Something builds: a pressure, the grief too big for the body, pulsing through medium.

2.a. Something transforms.

3. The energy emerges, changed; wet and new. It might surface as what in poetry is called a volta, an unexpected turn; the "climactic couplet" Krieger spots in one poem;¹⁰ the "image-imperatives" which emerged as Walter Benjamin looked at photographs of flowers up close.¹¹

3.a. Something else becomes possible.

e.g. In Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo," words pulse under the solid marble like a body tucked tight under a tucked duvet, "suffused with brilliance from inside, like a lamp." Underneath his own knowledge, something builds in "that dark center." Something "bursts like a star." The volta. An imperative, the final line: "You must change your life."¹²

Put another way, the solid writhes with the charge of perception, builds in the pressure of description – and breaks. The pop of lips – the pop of a joint in a socket. What is significant about the ekphrastic, in other words, is not its shape (as poem or urn), but the fact of its movement. Zoomed in close to the line of the thrumming ink, the line of ekphrasis moves to meet

⁷ Krieger, *Ekphrasis*, 284.

⁸ WJT Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," in *Picture Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 154.

⁹ Krieger, *Ekphrasis*, 278.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 265.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, "News about Flowers," in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2008) trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and others, 272.

¹² Rainer Maria Rilke, "Archaic Torso of Apollo." <https://poets.org/poem/archaic-torso-apollo>

itself – it has a meeting point. The meeting point is a mouth on a mouth, a resonant tone, the grief echoing across its foundational gap, within that simple and necessary distance-between. And then: it bursts beyond. The horses gallop. The fruit tastes. The finger swallows what is already seen – the memory. What remains – after the solid is pulled through the mouth, or the mouth pulled through the thick of the solid, the rock tumbling narrowly between – is a residue, thick and gummed to the lip. Something has lifted just enough that there is room for something else to move through. The self, the change, the opening. The distance, the possibility – The sound of drums under concrete. Something else becomes possible.

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Grief Ankle covers three clusters within this gap: (1) ekphrasis' psychoanalytic origin, (2) its self-making phenomenological accrual, and (3) its world-building enactment. The research questions corresponding to these three clusters are, respectively: (1) Where does ekphrasis come from?, (2) What does ekphrasis do?, and (3) Where does ekphrasis go? Or, put another way, *Grief Ankle* follows ekphrasis as it allows us to grieve (1) backward (our births), (2) through (our lives), and (3) together (our futures, our deaths).

Just as linguistics' subfields accumulate from the patterns of phonetics to the units of morphology, to the web of sociopragmatics; just as Krieger's classical ekphrasis overtakes the narrative of the epic – Achilles' shield depicting the "entire universe," "the whole world that is 'other'" to *The Illiad*'s action, turning their relation "inside-out" as the epic becomes "a fragment" in ekphrasis' "totalising vision" – these ekphrastic chapters too, accumulate incrementally to overtake the entire narrative of our lives: origin, ongoingness, release.¹³ The objects in a row, the tarot cards in a line. Each chapter accumulates to a voltaic propulsion; together, the three build to a cumulative, imperative rupture.

In part one, in the gap between the child and mother, ekphrasis captures the melancholic, mimetic retrieval of the first loss, its repetition transforming the rupture into a kind of forgiveness.

In part two, in the gap between the self and the self, ekphrasis is a scale model for the propulsion between the immediate word-object, the immediate self, and the chasm between them – turned, through the accumulation of turning material, into a field of self-surrounding.

In part three, in the gap between the self and the friend, ekphrasis' release finds its destination, its ultimate teleology, and the folding-in reason for these three chapters' epistolary form: co-constructing a world of meaning with/to/about the fathomable futurity of someone else.

¹³ Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," 178.

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Their lips sealed sticky, the kissing women begin to utter. Air frizzes through their nostrils, a buzzing merging into a single sonorance, a sound predating not just the space for language, but also somewhere just before melody. Mouth at the edge of a mouth, Hockett's productivity pushed through the muscle of lips.¹⁴ In this "Composition for Mouths (Songs My Mother Taught Me)," each woman sings her first song through a "single mouth cavity."¹⁵ The very hanging gap from which "the Thing falls from [you]," turned into a thrumming room.¹⁶

¹⁴ The property of productivity – one of the linguist Charles' Hockett's "design features," which enumerated qualities that set human languages apart from animal communication – recognizes the human capacity to produce an unlimited number of novel utterances. (Charles F. Hockett, "The origin of speech," in *Scientific American* 203, no. 3 (1960): 88-97.)

¹⁵ Thaddeus Ropac, "Oliver Beer at Opéra Garnier: Composition for Mouths (Songs My Mother Taught Me)." <https://ropac.net/news/600-oliver-beer-at-opera-garnier-composition-for-mouths-songs-my-mother-taught-me/>.

¹⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon Samuel Roudiez (New York: Oxford, 2006), 15.

Part 1: A Memory of Pigment: Painting, Psychoanalysis, & Where Ekphrasis Comes From

*In the waning light before the long winter of sickness, I was in the deflating chair at a desk next to yours. You looked at me; your feet touched the ground. Your eyebrows, your right one like mine. I didn't know yet about the symmetry above them. I didn't know yet about citrus. Already in our second email you asked what we were building. What was already ours: the middle of the night, the middle part in her hair. We buried something, hollowed a canyon; returned to somewhere to come from. I love everybody because I love you: I write to you first, because you are the beginning.*¹⁷

Dear Nivi,

In my childhood home, there were paintings I could not see. A red room drooping velvet.¹⁸ A pond swirling fish.¹⁹ In Durga Chew-Bose's childhood home, a Bruegel painting spilled the "lip of a jug," a red "like tomato soup from the can," a child "licking a plate."²⁰

In my home, the kids could plunge into these frames: Charlie whipped through the pigment, soft and crushed;²¹ Fern got her arm wet up to the elbow.²² In the light of a long afternoon, young Chew-Bose, too, entered "life's second ply."²³ "In staring long enough [at the painting], [she] was recasting it."²⁴

In the ninety-three page essay, "Heart Museum," which opens her 2017 book, *Too Much and Not the Mood*, Chew-Bose – my first art writer, who loves "a sentence that dips and stalls, and picks up, and then quiets"²⁵ – recasts the rhythm of her own origin. In the turns of her heart museum – walls tomato soup red, "a meaning archive; a parents' medicine cabinet," "the essence of a word from another language for which English has no word"²⁶ – she pulls the "texture of chiffon" from a first trip, surges to the movie directors she is always ever writing to – not always by

¹⁷ Mitski, "Strawberry Blond." Track 3, *Retired from Sad, New Career in Business* (Self-released, 2013).

¹⁸ Jenny Nimmo, *Charlie Bone and the Hidden King* (London: Dean, 2006), 89.

¹⁹ N. E. Bode, *The Anybodies* (Scholastic, 2004), 69

²⁰ Durga Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 33.

²¹ Nimmo, *Charlie Bone and the Hidden King*, 89.

²² Bode, *The Anybodies*, 69.

²³ Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood*, 36.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Durga Chew-Bose, "Bookforum Talks with Durga Chew-Bose," interview by Sarah Nicole-Prickett (2017), <https://www.bookforum.com/interviews/bookforum-talks-with-durga-chew-bose-17729>.

²⁶ Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood*, 93.

name, but always “in spirit, tone, wash.”²⁷ She echoes her friend’s Doreen’s laugh, twice; her best friend, Sarah, “*becomes* a Cy Twombly” painting: “out of focus,” a “nearness that calls upon space.”²⁸ Pulling in, out; forward, back: She remembers herself through what she is surrounded by. The stories her father repeats (“nobody was going to remember it unless you repeated it enough [...] for your memories to develop their own rhythm”²⁹); her memory “or my mother’s telling” (“there’s no use in trying to figure out which came first”).³⁰ “Even when I was nothing,” she writes, “I was arriving.”³¹

Even when we were nothing, we were arriving. We were already telling the story of origin (red was your first favourite colour because it is the first one a baby sees; mine pink, white, and red, because I wanted to show that I understood the birthing of pigment). We were already looking for each other in what we already knew: the oranges, third dimension, curl in the middle, the peel of a sticker on a wall. When I first wrote to you, it had already been years. There was no word in English; we made up the sound. We asked in our syntax. Orange in the first name, orange in my pocket. Usually, we have already told the story – we repeat it. We like the sound; it moves us. It moves.

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Mimesis,³² the drive to repeat, to recast the painting you can no longer see (the peeling Cassatts, a child and a mother, always close, always blue, as soft as the softening wall, converging on a corner in my mother’s bathroom; Amrita Sher-Gil’s *Three Girls* in Chew-Bose’s mother’s house, downed in “orange, mint, and red” salwar kurtas, who themselves “form a corner”),³³ to make up a story about where you come from through the object of your childhood fixation (the fingers of

²⁷ Ibid., 24.

²⁸ Ibid., 26.

²⁹ Ibid., 78.

³⁰ Ibid., 33.

³¹ Ibid., 27.

³² My sense of mimesis draws from Matthew Polotsky’s chapter on mimesis, which situates mimesis within psychoanalysis’ theories of identification (“the unconscious imitations of others that shape human identity”), as well as Elaine Miller’s essay, “Kenotic Art,” which includes Julia Kristeva’s writing on mimesis in “literary signification,” or as a symptom or feature of writing – something which “partakes of the symbolic order, but only partially.” In other words, mimesis is a feature of written language which disrupts it. (Matthew Polotsky, *Mimesis* (Routledge, London, 2006); Elaine P. Miller, “Kenotic Art,” in *Head Cases* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014)).

³³ Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood*, 15.

children in books running through paint; emerging, dripping; the canvas, rippling, intact), is an “imperfect repetition,” a retrieval of what cannot be retrieved.³⁴

In the light of a long afternoon, reading Chew-Bose's essays in artist books, I accidentally read the imperfect repetition of the same story told twice. In the first book, about the painter Ann Craven, who paints scenes over and over like, as Chew-Bose writes, leaving “a song on repeat in order to cry,”³⁵ Keith Mayerson quotes Marc Glimcher telling a story about the painter Agnes Martin. In it, Martin picks up a rose and says to Glimcher's granddaughter, Isabel, “Is this rose beautiful, Isabel?” Isabel says, “Yes, this rose is beautiful.” She puts the rose behind her back and says, “Is the rose still beautiful?” (“Yes, the rose is still beautiful.”) “You see,” says Martin, “the beauty is not in the rose, the beauty is in your mind.”³⁶

In the second book, about Agnes Martin herself, just before Chew-Bose calls her sun-sucked colour “summers (plural),” Glimcher writes the story himself.³⁷ This time, Isabel is spelled Isabelle; this time, Isabelle is not his granddaughter, but his eldest daughter. Isabelle asks, “Agnes, what are your paintings of?” Martin plucks the second rose and asks, “Isabelle, is this beautiful?” (“Yes, Agnes.”) Martin puts the rose behind her second back. She asks, “Is it still beautiful?” (“Yes, Agnes.”) “Gently waving her hand in the air where the rose had been,” Martin says, “My paintings are of this.”³⁸

In the rash of their mismatch, these stories' questions (Is it still? Is the rose still?) and hidden roses glint with the sliver of what in phonetics is called minimal difference: the minimal, meaning-making contrast between two otherwise identical sounds.³⁹ The meaning made in the same story repeated, in a granddaughter becoming a daughter, in the same rose behind the same

³⁴ Julia Kristeva, quoted in Elaine P. Miller, “Kenotic Art,” in *Head Cases: Julia Kristeva on Philosophy and Art in Depressed Times* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 62.

³⁵ Durga Chew-Bose, “Freaks Me Out That I Haven't Changed Much,” in *Ann Craven: Animals, Birds, Flowers, Moons* (New York: Karma, 2021), 11.

³⁶ Keith Mayerson, “The Sublime Beauty of the Everyday Miracle,” in *Ann Craven: Animals, Birds, Flowers, Moons* (New York: Karma, 2021), 77-78.

³⁷ Durga Chew-Bose, “In Imagination Only,” in *Agnes Martin: The Distillation of Color* (New York: Pace Publishing, 2021), 48.

³⁸ Marc Glimcher, “Walking on a Razorback Mesa with Agnes,” in *Agnes Martin: The Distillation of Color* (New York: Pace Publishing, 2021), 13.

³⁹ For example, despite everything about the place of articulation (both lips) and manner of articulation (a pop) being identical, despite the only difference being whether the petals of the voice box flutter in “voicing,” the difference between “bee” and “pee” is meaning-making in English. (See e.g. Judit Rebeka Campos-Astorkiza, “Minimal contrast and the phonology-phonetics interaction,” PhD diss., 2007.)

back turning, is in the echo half-seen. The echo of memory, its own rhythm. The story becomes about some other, third thing: what does not overlap.

(What does not overlap: Martin's hand-match struck "the little patch of air" left by the rose; lighting its absence.⁴⁰ The sleeping lover's hand twitches like the hand of the dead one; the girl's "own being waver[ing]⁴¹ A scar on one woman's cheek – "before I knew what it was, I was sure that the mark on her face was a rose she had put there on purpose because she loved the beauty of roses so ⁴²much she wanted to wear one on her face" – marks another woman's roseless one. Violence, its absence, like the imprint left after looking too long at the ⁴³)

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Mimesis' imperfection is often a means of, at least provisionally, preserving "a lost ideal."⁴³ Young Chew-Bose's "proficien[cy] at having my attention drawn away,"⁴⁴ her memorization of Bruegel's soup-red "until it spun in my memory's reel,"⁴⁵ pulled her away from "the sound of parents who were speaking to each other in a strained tone."⁴⁶ Fern, storybook orphan, "half her arm inside of a painting," thinking, "this was what home must feel like, this or something very close to it."⁴⁷ Freud's grandchild, half his arm off the edge of a bed, letting string spool out of sight, shouting, "Gone!" pulling it up to catch it; shouting: "Here!"⁴⁸ back and forth, over and over, giving the child control of an object's arrival and departure, a "symbolic mastery over the (temporary) loss" of the mother.⁴⁹

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⁴⁰ Glimcher, "Walking on a Razorback Mesa with Agnes," 14.

⁴¹ Julia Kristeva, "Duras and the Malady of Death," in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 248.

⁴² Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy* (Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1990), 25.

⁴³ Matthew Polotsky, *Mimesis* (London: Routledge, 2006), 120.

⁴⁴ Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood*, 48.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Bode, *The Anybodies*, 169.

⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the pleasure principle," *Psychoanalysis and History* 17, no. 2 (2015): 160.

⁴⁹ Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (Duke University Press, 2019), 82.

Dear Nivi,

In the painting you cannot see, the child holds the mother holds the child. Her hand on her hand, her face on her hand on her face. *The sound of voices*. Her eyes on her mouth. *The sound of her voice*. Her finger presses into her cheek. Her hand presses into the fabric. There is some give. The leaves widen to open. *I open my mouth wide and make a sound. That was an impression of the hole, I say*. The pull snaps. The child tumbles down.

The child's open mouth: is empty. Babbling *ma, ma*, barely a sound, prescribed meaning, meaning loss, the child, as the psychoanalytic philosopher Julia Kristeva understands her, has, in the loss of her mother, stumbled into the "meaningful" codification of signified language. Any utterance towards the Thing – what has now formed in the "distant light" in the centre of her mouth,⁵⁰ the "impossible love"⁵¹ on a hill in Maryland,⁵² what is "never reached, always elsewhere," – now cedes to symbolic representation what is precisely "unrepresentable," the original void "that perhaps only devouring might represent, or an invocation might point out, but no word could signify."⁵³

There is no word, in English or otherwise, for this "sense of a primal loss, this Thing in us," which now "precedes any later losses of real and particular objects" – even the rose in our hands, the love in our hands, before it is echoed in story, is "in this primal sense already sundered from us."⁵⁴ It is lost even in the holding of its name. But there is only one place left to go: down the hall. So the child putters out. She "leaves the crib to join the mother in the realm of representations;"⁵⁵ she lapses the corridor's distance to "try to find her again, along with other objects of love, first in the imagination, then in words."⁵⁶

Because, as the literary scholar Peter Schwenger writes, "the very dynamic of representation involves loss," ekphrasis' writing-about, a story about a story about a flower, red of a red, hand of a hand, might seem even further from "satisfy[ing] the original desire" for the Thing, the

⁵⁰ Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 10.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² The Maryland-born painter Louis Fratino once said, "All summer light is Maryland light." So, writes Chew-Bose, "that's Maryland light polishing a butt cheek, [...] on white tulips drooping; on pinched sheets; on the cherry tomato. That's Maryland light on a hilltop, even if it's not, because [...] Maryland light, before all else, is fixed." It's fixed, and recast, and recast. (Durga Chew-Bose, "Durga Chew-Bose on the Art of Louis Fratino." *Artforum International Magazine* (November 2021), <https://www.artforum.com/print/202102/durga-chew-bose-on-louis-fratino-85008>).

⁵³ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 13.

⁵⁴ Schwenger, *The Tears of Things*, 10.

⁵⁵ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 11.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 7.

“absent object preceding its replication in the medium” (which, writes Schwenger, art cannot do – it can “only reflect the drive toward fulfilling it”).⁵⁷ But because ekphrasis emerges in language, the minimal difference in its translation (to “a sentence that dips and stalls, and picks up, and then quiets”⁵⁸) contains what Kristeva calls the semiotic, the hum of the mother’s chest, the resonant frequency of a first voice. It is found again in language’s “rhythm,” “musical intonation,” and other parts of “every linguistic act that are meaningful yet do not represent or signify.”⁵⁹ Even as ekphrasis repeats itself, even as it changes in its repetitions, the sound of the semiotic lifts through, rumbling under the language.

As that loss reduplicates, the underlying pattern of grief’s grammar emerges. Similar to language’s patterns of sounds; similar to Jacques Lacan’s idea of the language-like unconscious, the hinge of which moves constantly around the very “lack that causes the movement of the whole.”⁶⁰ Though Kristeva contends that the unconscious is not like a language but rather made of “imprints of the Other, including and most particularly those that are most archaic, ‘semiotic’” – those very imprints *do* pattern as a language would.⁶¹ They repeat, bobbing light, meaning, meaning something – *it means something because it means something to me*. “The unspeakable and underlying, can have, does have a grammar,” I wrote to you in my first email, surrounded by the indents of orange peels.

The smallest unit – think of *ma, ma, ba* – of Lacan’s linguistic subconscious follows “a double movement” of connection and substitution: connected in a metonymic chain, each unit stands in, in turn, for “the One,” “the hole left vacant” by absence, and, in so doing, produces the “fruit” of the “metaphorical signifier.”⁶²

Three points on our chain of signifying fruits:

- Over the course of one childhood summer, Chew-Bose watched as the sun bleached the painting on the cover of Edward Said’s “Orientalism”: “I remember the boy’s bum. It looked real; round like *melons*.”⁶³

(In his memoir, Edward Said traces the “primal instability” of not having an “absolute first language” to his mother, who spoke to him in both English and Arabic, “creating an atmosphere

⁵⁷ Schwenger, *The Tears of Things*, 14.

⁵⁸ Chew-Bose, “Bookforum Talks with Durga Chew-Bose.”

⁵⁹ Kristeva in Miller, “Kenotic Art,” 62.

⁶⁰ Juan-David Nasio, *Five Lessons on the Psychoanalytic Theory of Jacques Lacan*, (SUNY Press, 1998), 51.

⁶¹ Julia Kristeva, “Dostoyevsky, Suffering, Forgiveness,” in *Black Sun*, 205.

⁶² Nasio, *Five Lessons on the Psychoanalytic Theory of Jacques Lacan*, 51.

⁶³ Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood*, 35.

*dreamily seductive then suddenly snatched away, promising something in the end never given.”)*⁶⁴

- “A melon,” Woolf’s Orlando calls his love upon first sight. “A pineapple, an olive tree, an emerald, [...] all things he had like the taste of as a boy.”⁶⁵

*(On April 11, 1931, Woolf ended a diary entry with “too much and not the mood,” “a string of words that [Chew-Bose] simply really loved the rhythm of,” a taste of fruit she liked so much that it became the title of her 2017 book.)*⁶⁶

- The cut melons, the sisters I grew up with (the three of us, forming a corner) always say when I ask them what of my maman they remember most.⁶⁷

(The language of the unconscious, to Lacan, is the maternal lalangue (joining the French article and noun, a phonetic imprint, to my ear, of what French children do with words like water: the article-noun cluster l’eau a reduplicated lolo).⁶⁸ Lalangue is the “familiar, maternal French of his or her personal history” – the familiar, personal language of one’s maternal history, of imprints and echoes from just beyond a tiny arm’s reach.⁶⁹ Similar to Kristeva’s semiotic, lalangue – with its focus on the tongue in tight alveolar space⁷⁰ – is “intimately linked to the body.”⁷¹ The body as participle of the past. Multilingual Chew-Bose: “summer (été) really does feel like the past participle of “to be” (être).”⁷²)

⁶⁴ Edward Said, *Out of Place* (Vintage Books, 1999), 4.

⁶⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (Wordsworth Editions, 1995), 36.

⁶⁶ Durga Chew-Bose, “On the Power of Uncertainty,” *The Creative Independent*, interviewed by Thora Siemsen (2017), <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/durga-chew-bose-on-the-power-of-uncertainty/>.

⁶⁷ The long hours were spent conflating the frill with Emily Dickinson, with the floral hat box, soap and dust smell, which held nothing except for a nimbostratus-blue scarf and a fake orange pearl bangle.

⁶⁸ In Linguistics, reduplication is process in which the root, stem, or total word is repeated exactly or with a slight change. (See e.g. Carl Rubino, “Reduplication: Form, function and distribution.” *Studies on reduplication* 28 (2005): 11-29.)

⁶⁹ Nasio, *Five Lessons on the Psychoanalytic Theory of Jacques Lacan*, 50.

⁷⁰ In an alveolar consonant like /l/, the tongue tip approaches or touches the alveolar ridge immediately behind the upper teeth. (See e.g. April MS McMahon, *An introduction to English phonology*. Vol. 22. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002.)

⁷¹ Nasio, *Five Lessons on the Psychoanalytic Theory of Jacques Lacan*, 50.

⁷² Durga Chew-Bose (@durgapolashi). Tweet. August 8, 2018, <https://x.com/durgapolashi/status/1027301138909937664?s=20>.

A melon, a melon, a melon, three little faces buried in the firm bow of the rind. Each of them bobs, for a moment, in place of the lack placed “permanently at the periphery,” but even when this lack is occupied “provisionally,” it leaves another hole: “the place left vacant” in the place of the melon itself.⁷³ The air left vacant where the rose used to be. Absence, too, repeats.

—

As “the quality of a lost past is described through the present image” of ekphrasis,⁷⁴ as the quality of its memory is *allowed* to repeat, it “proliferate[s] in multiple significations.”⁷⁵ Under another Amrita Sher-Gil print in Chew-Bose’s mother’s house is a dark chest. Inside it, a shirt, which, unfolded, smells like Chew-Bose’s father in his twenties, like “paint drying and the sound of Mingus’s hard bop,” like “what I can only describe as a stretch.”⁷⁶ And, as Chew-Bose inhales her father’s shirt again and again, “while it smells like none of those things, it does.”⁷⁷ As I look out of the corner of my eye in the memory of the bathroom, the air does not go in and out. It streams out in every direction, a fanning of thundering horses.

Put another way, mimesis, which creates “echoes, doubles,”⁷⁸ halved twins and switched matches, is “in a very real sense ... the creation of memory.”⁷⁹ And ekphrasis, as Chew-Bose calls her writing, is a “form of retrieval.”⁸⁰ A retrieval which changes each time it is pulled from the chest. You retrieve, it changes; it reveals its own structure. The voice behind the fence, the fruits bobbing behind the back. Writing’s reduplicated double, further and further from the substance of its description, opens up an “unsuspected, unfathomable substance”: something else echoes in the repetition of absence.⁸¹

The grandchild pulls and repulls the stem of the string, the grandchild-turned-daughter pulls and repulls at the spool of the rose, the daughter-turned-writer spills the red of the painting – “to repossess,” “to confuse repossession with the distraction it allowed,” to cleave the memory, to turn it into a different outcome.⁸² Until it turns on its own, and splits. Until I remember they

⁷³ Nasio, *Five Lessons on the Psychoanalytic Theory of Jacques Lacan*, 51.

⁷⁴ Schwenger, *The Tears of Things*, 13.

⁷⁵ Elaine P. Miller, “Kenotic Art,” in *Head Cases: Julia Kristeva on Philosophy and Art in Depressed Times* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 79.

⁷⁶ Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood*, 45.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Kristeva, “The Malady of Grief: Duras,” in *Black Sun*, 246.

⁷⁹ Miller, Elaine P. “Kenotic Art.” 79.

⁸⁰ Chew-Bose, “Bookforum Talks with Durga Chew-Bose.”

⁸¹ Kristeva, “The Malady of Grief: Duras,” 246.

⁸² Chew-Bose, Durga. *Too Much and Not the Mood*, 36.

weren't Cassatts in the bathroom – something yellow, early spring, my own close mother, in front of me, holding my hands to squeeze – they were bound in one book, the corner of which pinked with the light not blocked by the French dictionary.⁸³ Until the painting I described is not one Cassatt, but two: *Mother's Caress*,⁸⁴ *Child's Caress*,⁸⁵ flipped titles for nearly identical scenes. Her hand on her mouth, her hand on her mouth. Her arm all around her new torso, fingers too close to the eye – calling, recalling, the first halving, the walk down the hall –

until the child is the one doing the leaving.

—

In my dream, Maman and I are on the floor in Colorado. She is never sick in my dreams. We are flipping through a book; there is a white seal in white snow. I say, "We used to have another book with this cover."

—

Some mimesis, some repetition, a mourning of the “fundamental loss” of the Thing left “incomplete,” can warp into melancholia.⁸⁶ In melancholia, the object, in the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott's terms, “become[s] meaningful,” imbued with highly personal non-meaning.⁸⁷ In Kristeva's terms, the “shadow of the object falls upon the ego,” and the melancholic puts that shadow in their mouth.⁸⁸ They chew – “better fragmented, torn, cut up, swallowed, digested ... than lost” – and language, lacking its requisite corridor, collapses entirely.⁸⁹ Winnicott's object-use – in which the Thing is “part of a shared reality, not a bundle of projections” – disintegrates.⁹⁰

⁸³ Still, in the book I find next to where I always sit on the floor in the library, are the mothers I remembered, faces eyelash-close (Susan Comforts the Baby, Margot Embracing Her Mother, The Caress), hands above the belly (The Family), below the belly (The Bath), steadying their babies' new abdomens (Mother About to Wash Her Sleepy Child). There are the baby's hands: plump at the bottom of the mother's chin (Baby's First Caress), plump at the bottom of the mother's chin (Emmie and Her Child). (Nancy Matthews, *Mary Cassatt* (New York: Abrams in association with National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1998).

⁸⁴ Mary Cassatt, *Maternal Caress*, Oil on canvas, 1896.

⁸⁵ Mary Cassatt, *The Child's Caress*, Oil on canvas, 1890.

⁸⁶ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 42.

⁸⁷ Donald W. Winnicott, “The Use of an Object and Relating Through Identifications,” in *The Collected Works of D. W. Winnicott*, vol. 12 (Oxford University Press, 2016), 2.

⁸⁸ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 42.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Winnicott, “The Use of an Object,” 2.

In order to reattain object-use, for the child/subject to experience the object/mother as outside of “omnipotent control,” “out in the world,” for the inside of your mouth to return to being the inside of your mouth, the greyed objects of melancholic cannibalism dropping one by one from the edge of your tongue – the subject cannot merely “regain relation” to the object – the subject must destroy it.⁹¹ And the object must, in turn, survive that destruction.

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In Marguerite Duras’ “The Lover” – whose work, after the “mystery in full daylight” in Claude Lorrain’s paintings, Kristeva calls “madness in full daylight;⁹² whose work Chew-Bose loves for how it knocks at “memory’s haunting appeal,” its “prophetic powers,” at “the little clues we pick up when we look back,”⁹³ its *memory* in full daylight – the speaker reconstructs an “unsuspected, unfathomable substance” in the middle of her mother’s lonely portrait.⁹⁴ “Her hair is done nicely, her clothes just so, butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth.”⁹⁵ The sentence bumps into its own end. The mother’s lips suddenly the seam of a butter bell, tense fat suspended in water. Bloated with the blunt of her daughter’s own anger.

(Chew-Bose, too, thinks “about my mother again. Young again,” wonders about another kind of liquid suspension: “if she did in fact, like me, consider [...] how the cherry liqueur gets inside the chocolate.”⁹⁶ Red in the red in the red of her mouth.)

—

Forgiveness, to Kristeva, “does not cleanse.”⁹⁷ It “raises the conscience from beneath the actions,” from beneath its blushing head, and says, “I take you for a child.”⁹⁸ “I exclude you from history for a while.”⁹⁹ It lifts its cheeks in both hands and “has it meet a loving other.”¹⁰⁰ The

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Kristeva, “The Malady of Grief,” 228.

⁹³ Durga Chew-Bose, “‘Listening to My Friends Is One of My Favorite Ways to Write’: An Interview with Durga Chew-Bose,” interview by Ellen Whittet, *The Ploughshares Blog*. <https://blog.pshares.org/listening-to-my-friends-is-one-of-my-favorite-ways-to-write-an-interview-with-durga-chew-bose/>.

⁹⁴ Kristeva, “The Malady of Grief,” 246.

⁹⁵ Marguerite Duras, *The Lover* (Yogyakarta: Jalasutra, 2004), 90.

⁹⁶ Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood*, 65.

⁹⁷ Kristeva, “Dostoyevsky, Suffering, Forgiveness,” in *Black Sun*, 206.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 205.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 206.

loving other's destruction and survival, the canvas gently rebounding from the tantrum's wretched puncture, is its own forgiveness.

By holding the familiar "erosion of meaning, melancholia, and abjection," in its own mouth, forgiveness, like a bird mother, "displaces them."¹⁰¹ Something dislodges. Something else becomes possible. Another birth, "a second life," a life "requisite for the subject's [own] survival."¹⁰²

(The object (the mother) can then embark, too, on "its own autonomy and life [...] according to its own properties."¹⁰³ In *Breakfast in Bed*, the mother's arms loop around the baby's torso, her face fuzzed by sleep, the room green just like my grand-maman's, the children's heads pupping up between sheets, pink pillow like a ribbon, my little brother turning¹⁰⁴ – mug on the table, a mother's life, a mother's work.¹⁰⁵)

She (the daughter, the mother) pulls out from the pigment, "rings rippling,"¹⁰⁶ "reborn" and reborn.¹⁰⁷ The opposite motion to what the melancholic, in their "disavowal of negation," stuffs in their mouth, "void[ing] the signifier," this new process "insure[s] the life of the imagination," of language, of madness, of memory – of the memory of a mother in full daylight.¹⁰⁸ In full daylight, the colour of memory lifts. From paintings, from books, from the paintings in books.

The corridor that triggered the onset of symbolic language, which collapses and re-stretches with each new instantiation of object-as-other, from subject-as-self, is the same gap which forgives us that very distance. A place left vacant, shouting, spilling, shouting, pulling, spilling, pulling, taut, the semiotic, imbedded in ekphrasis, survives the gnashing mouth of destruction. In its amniotic submersion, colours spilling into the other room, the "substratum of myself, from which images emerge and come into sight unannounced," ("It's there that the commotion begins. The quietest riot, at first"), the swollen nothing-everything builds.¹⁰⁹ "What's irrepressible shoots up."¹¹⁰ The fragrance of the mother, the rose — she becomes it; she destroys it; the memory becomes her own ekphrasis. Her own repetition, experienced outside of her. The surface breaks, "followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful."¹¹¹ "All of a sudden I am lifediven, numb and tingly.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 207.

¹⁰³ Winnicott, "The Use of an Object," 4.

¹⁰⁴ Mary Cassatt, *Breakfast in Bed*, Oil on canvas, 1897.

¹⁰⁵ a nod to "a woman's work" in FKA Twigs' song, "Mary Magdalene." (FKA Twigs, "Mary Magdalene," Track 5, *Cellophane*. Young Turks, 2019.)

¹⁰⁶ Bode, *The Anybodies*, 169.

¹⁰⁷ Kristeva, "Dostoyevsky, Suffering, Forgiveness," 206.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood*, 39.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Immanuel Kant, quoted in Schwenger, *The tears of things*, 43.

Opulent and part velocity.”¹¹² The volta usurps. “I am on the move.”¹¹³ The imperative emerges – broad, and bobbing – it softens to agency. “I am individualized. I have my own attention.”¹¹⁴

We have already left, over and over, spool out of sight. Where we come from, we realized, is where we are going. It opens up red in the dark. It *glows pink in the night*.¹¹⁵ We are the baby. We are the mother. We are us. We can go.

¹¹² Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood*, 39.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Mitski, “Pink in the night.” Track 10, *Be the Cowboy*. Dead Oceans, 2018.

As I rewrote “memories develop their own rhythm,” someone stilled outside the library window.¹¹⁶ It was Jo. I met him out back; he’d already eaten his chicken. A child ran melons around the courtyard as Jo told me about William Carlos Williams dancing naked, “buttocks / against the yellow drawn shades.”¹¹⁷ Yellow butter, melting in the middle of a mouth. I told him, “Ekphrasis is something stilled so that something else can move through” – as the child snapped through the stilled branches behind us. Jo repeated it. I don’t remember what was moving in Jo’s example, but I remember his hands: palms out, thumbs touching, moving up.

¹¹⁶ Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood*, 78.

¹¹⁷ William Carlos Williams, “Danse Russe,” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46483/danse-russe>.

Part 2: A Pile Means Time is Touching: Photography, Trans Phenomenology & What Ekphrasis Does

Roland Barthes found his child mother in a winter garden: “There she is! She’s really there!”¹¹⁸ That feeling, to see her¹¹⁹ there, finally, his first loss captured, the density of the semiotic pushing through his parentheticals (“(so tired, so noble, sitting in front of the door of our house, surrounded by my friends)”),¹²⁰ “an ivory powder box (I loved the sound of its lid)”¹²¹ – it was “the end of all language.”¹²² Moving from that melancholy-memory of “the only photograph which assuredly existed for me,”¹²³ he decides to derive the essence of “all photography” from this image, to “outline the loved face by thought,”¹²⁴ the gap of that first “wound.”¹²⁵ Barthes’ gap is the space through which the first chapter surges. This chapter’s gap, albeit echoing familiar, swells in another arrangement of photographs – a pile of them. The gap that we become.

Dear Lee,

In the photograph you cannot see, we are tossing our arms up with the thrust of a leaf pile, our teeth ravenous, hands snapping, eyes pushed to the sides of their sockets. You and I (not neighbours; we lived down the street; our parents walked distant and small as we ran) were lost to each other for a long time. I first wrote to you again from my first own table, on a tablecloth, each sheet imprinted with the soft press of the writing above it. We were asking the same question, over and over, but, as Chew-Bose writes, “I’ll devise another layer to avoid what’s at stake.”¹²⁶ As the trans poet Yanyi writes, “Anything can be anything when I don’t want something to be happening.”¹²⁷ What was happening: we were us.

As the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes of sexuality, what we were doing was “proprioceptive”: a matter “not of seeing but of *sensing* [...] below and beyond the threshold of

¹¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 71.

¹¹⁹ In a birthday photograph, the world moves in relation to her. Slow glowing. Uplook like a saint, part of the scene, but also apart because she is its source. Everyone in this photo is related through her: her siblings, my cousin, me. But it’s more than that. How we all exhale-laugh. How the heart I drew radiates. How her necklace stays, certain. How her whole body watches, there, just there, as her whole body warms out the room.

¹²⁰ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 64.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 71.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹²⁶ Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood*, 37.

¹²⁷ Yanyi. *The Year of Blue Water* (Yale University Press, 2019), 27.

the visible.”¹²⁸ Below and beyond the threshold of the visible (at which ekphrasis flickers) we reached. We felt not our arms, “unbent and reaching out,” but “an intensification of both the proximity and the absence”¹²⁹ of what we were stretching to, which “diffuse[d] even as it intensifie[d] because [we were] suddenly spread out”: located both in our bending bodies and “that toward which [our bodies bent].”¹³⁰

Bent, unbent, reaching, stretched, we laugh now about the boy objects of spreading: sunscreen left knocked; an empty Gatorade bottle on your nightstand; the men, just outside of my summer job at a photography gallery, humming their coordination to lift a plank from their ski rack. A tarp in the open trunk, neat and folded.

I waited, I stepped out, pretending to drink water, my sense of myself, the “purpose of [my] body’s materiality,”¹³¹ “coalescing around a purposeful being toward a desired object”¹³² – one never “whole and entire,” but made up of a “fixation on this particular part or that – or a number of parts in succession.”¹³³ A masculinity, which, as Merleau-Ponty writes, is “gestural,” “mimetic,” a citation, already, of “another masculine body” which stands (like the Thing, like the already-lost object, like the men just across the street), “in some remote elsewhere,” but which is still “proximate enough to function as a structuring ideal.”¹³⁴ The structuring ideal of the same shorts as always, the clean line of the well-used tarp.

—

Dear Lee,

In the basements of our first homes, mothers’ steps on the ceiling, we “tend[ed] toward” what was “in reach.”¹³⁵ The costume closet, gnarled wigs, snagging hats, quiet feet on the cool tile. What is “already given” in the domestic, what is “near enough” for a child to reach, is, to the queer theorist Sara Ahmed, heterosexuality’s inheritance: what seminal queer theorist Judith Butler calls a “field of heterosexual objects,” the proximity of “certain objects” – the man holding his youngest son’s shoulder, his older son holding the other, their arms crossed behind,

¹²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. Quoted in Salamon, Gayle. “The Sexual Schema: Transposition and Transgender in Phenomenology of Perception,” in *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 48.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹³¹ Gayle Salamon, “The Sexual Schema: Transposition and Transgender in Phenomenology of Perception,” in *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 48.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 48.

¹³³ Merleau-Ponty, quoted in Salamon, “The Sexual Schema,” 54.

¹³⁴ Salamon, “The Sexual Schema,” 54.

¹³⁵ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 86.

the older son inching his other hand closer to the father's unmoving finger – and not others.¹³⁶ This field impels the child to “repay the debt of life with its life” by picking up those near objects and recreating it, but also, like Kristeva's origin story for symbolic language, through negation: by “giv[ing] up’ the possibility of other love objects,” “those whom it would be impossible to love,” and not grieving what is beyond their reach.¹³⁷

Sara Ahmed and the trans scholar Gayle Salamon are invested in another queer possibility: For Ahmed, the lesbian other allows for a “reorientation of one's body such that other objects, those that are not reachable on the vertical and horizontal lines of straight culture, can be reached.”¹³⁸ Through repetition toward this other person,¹³⁹ the material of another life grows as it nears, even giving “the world a new shape.”¹⁴⁰ Gayle Salamon writes transness, too, as a product of a certain kind of intersubjective contact.¹⁴¹ For Salamon, working with the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, because the trans subject's “contours” hold “something less than the truth of that body's sex,” the loved other participates in holding its truth “between the perceiver and the perceived.”¹⁴²

But, to my mind, there is no loved other inherent to what we might call a field of cisgender objects. The lost object which must go ungrieved in this case is more clearly the *self* who might have deviated from the cisgender line, the one standing in precise inverse to the love shining down the field's genealogy. And if the body becomes in “interaction with what surrounds it,”¹⁴³ if my body is a “product of relations”¹⁴⁴ between “myself, the other, and the world,”¹⁴⁵ my interest is in that third axis, the world, the *objects* of the structuring ideal of the self which might not be grieved.

Like Yanyi's “comfortable,” “undoubtedly masculine” loafers, which he kept in his closet until the third day of “her” visit, thinking, “No one looks at anyone's shoes.”¹⁴⁶ At the museum, they were all she could talk about; at dinner, she threw them away. He “had to empty the rice onto my shoes and I never saw them again.”¹⁴⁷

¹³⁶ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 87.

¹³⁷ Butler, quoted in Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 87.

¹³⁸ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 100.

¹³⁹ Ahmed sees no problem engaging with the idea that one might “become” a lesbian because of contact with others, as long as “straight orientations” are also recognized as being shaped by “reachable” contact and “the lines of social and familiar inheritance.” (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 94).

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 102.

¹⁴¹ Two things to note: Salamon is working with Merleau-Ponty's writing on sexuality, but she is neither conflating sexuality and transness, nor is she stripping transness of its propulsive movement. She asks, “Is there room in this picture for desire?” (Salamon, “The Sexual Schema,” 45).

¹⁴² Ibid., 62.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 59.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 48.

¹⁴⁶ Yanyi, *The Year of Blue Water*, 26.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

Those grieved objects, grief ankles at the “join between desire and the body,” which can be an “auxiliary not organically attached to the body,” might, like Ahmed and Salamon’s loved other, be involved in a nascent turn towards convergent embodiment.¹⁴⁸ They, as Jose Esteban Muñoz writes, might embody a “mode of being and feeling that was then not quite there,” but are “nonetheless an opening”:¹⁴⁹

How, when Yanyi took the family computer in his bedroom to watch the L Word, but [...] I saw myself in longing: right before the kiss, looking without having to look away.”¹⁵⁰ The computer in his lap opened: “a hot brick of plastic: a door.”¹⁵¹

How, when Elliot Page listened to Peaches in his bedroom for the first time, the song was feeling something past his tense and rigid body – past his tense, all holding. How, when he told the story, he lifted both of his hands. They opened: I saw a boombox on a windowsill, curtains heavy.¹⁵²

These object-openings are both immediate and distant – their current embodiments the product of a process as yet to be undergone. Just as the first gap created the possibility for the thrust toward language – the pang of another hollow echoes familiar – in this one we lurch toward the embodiment of a future self not yet possible. Towards the immediate embodiment (the grief ankle) of an elusive future embodiment which has not been spoken or fathomed (the self).

This immediate impossibility may trigger a reorientation – as Ahmed writes, “it is often loss that generates a new direction”¹⁵³ – but one which can only be achieved through minor increments. So in the immediate experience of the gap, between this object’s embodiment and the self’s not yet possible future, the movement is often something else. Elliot cried at the song. Lou was “the nicest” when he wore his blue jeans.¹⁵⁴ Yanyi, on the page after the shoes full of rice, writes, “real anger is suffused with desperation. It doesn’t go away. It murmurs beneath the crust of the ground, or a person who serves as the ground you stand on.”¹⁵⁵

—

I sat, maybe 10, wearing a plaid blue shirt with my hair low ponied. Pushing the peach and dusty blue pencils to mimic the roof and the sky. I didn’t have a word, but I felt myself in these

¹⁴⁸ Salamon, “The Sexual Schema,” 48.

¹⁴⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia, 10th Anniversary Edition* (New York University Press, 2019), 22.

¹⁵⁰ Yanyi, *The Year of Blue Water*, 27.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Elliot Page, “In Conversation With... Elliot Page,” interview by Chase Joynt, *TIFF Lightbox*, June 16, 2023.

¹⁵³ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 18.

¹⁵⁴ Lou Sullivan, *We Both Laughed in Pleasure: The Selected Diaries of Lou Sullivan, 1961-1991* (Nightboat Books, 2019), 49.

¹⁵⁵ Yanyi, *The Year of Blue Water*, 27.

gestures, felt my doubled fear in reaction. My real desire was suffused with desperation. It didn't go away. It murmured beneath the crust of the ground, or the person who served as the ground I stood on.

—

Dear Lee,

In the photograph you cannot see,¹⁵⁶ heel lifted to walk, mouth pert before the rumble, is one idea of the men we come from.¹⁵⁷ The first father, who, as the day leaned like an iris stalk, caught his sliding child; the other, green shorts, who took off his shirt to play soccer. The way they hold their bodies was familiar – so matter of fact, a torso. Wide-shouldered for nothing other than function, shorts Adidas, Nike swoosh of light, whatever socks were clean. Laces like his loose fingers, mine, veins filling like in the photo Ann took of me in front of *Deer Hirsch* the same week I started T.¹⁵⁸

Chew-Bose – who is, of course, how I learned about the photographer Wolfgang Tillmans – finds “two stories tak[ing] place simultaneously” in his work, “each part altering the other.”¹⁵⁹ Their immediate embodiment, their impossible remoteness. In *Jeans over Stairpost*, “the simple act of denim resting on a banister gives way to bulge”: the familiarity of immediate distance.¹⁶⁰ “A ghost crotch.”¹⁶¹ A grief ankle. Pulling from my torso in front of an arrangement of objects – garlic carcass petals; garlic head, plump in the netting you cut out of swim trunks, a lime shrinking at the pores, narrow shelf just like the one in my own kitchen¹⁶² – which, as she writes, are “no longer objects, but acquaintances.”¹⁶³

¹⁵⁶ Wolfgang Tillmans, *August self portrait*, 2005, photograph, 2005.

¹⁵⁷ “Where we come from” being a speculative place, rather than a fixed point in the past.

¹⁵⁸ *Deer Hirsch*: Tillmans stands, tall as I am, one pant leg rolled up, backpack slung low, hair clipped cool. He holds his hands, tense in front of him, fingers braced, an orb of a greeting. A deer – eyes round as the idea he is holding in the tension of his hands, face as flat as the earth around them – antlers back to him. their muscles latched. Their ankles bare. Their shadows stark, barren earth, barren sky, bare of colour, their separation “both real and semblance,” a “state of differentiation without domination, with the differentiated participating in each other.” (Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 247)

¹⁵⁹ Durga Chew-Bose, “The Day Came Fat with an Apple in its Mouth,” in *Wolfgang Tillmans: To Look without Fear* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2022), 235.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² Wolfgang Tillmans, *Still Life*, *Tel Aviv*, 1999, photograph, 1999.

¹⁶³ Chew-Bose, “The Day Came Fat with an Apple in its Mouth,” 235.

“It’s like, I have that,” said someone close to me, conjuring Barthes, who – following Freud’s contention that “there is no other place [than the maternal body] of which one can say with so much certainty that one has already been there” – concludes that the essence of the certainty he felt looking at a different photograph “awaken[ed] in me the Mother.”¹⁶⁴ He calls his certainty the punctum, a highly personal meaning (reminiscent of Kristeva’s melancholic’s) that punctures through a photograph’s stillness. The punctum, which “fills the sight by force,”¹⁶⁵ ultimately signals that every photograph is “a catastrophe which has already occurred” (“I shudder, like Winnicott’s psychotic patient”).¹⁶⁶ No matter the photograph’s subject, Barthes’ punctum declares, “He is going to die.”¹⁶⁷ (But my lump in front of Tillmans’ work is a perpetual youth: It puts me at the front of life before choosing, always about to enter the room.)¹⁶⁸

—

Christina Sharpe finds her child mother – who gave Sharpe the “space to be precious—as in vulnerable, as in cherished,”¹⁶⁹ who let her read “for whole days at a time” in her “two feet deep, three feet wide, four feet high” childhood windowsill¹⁷⁰ – in a Halloween photograph from 1928. In it, her young grandmother and five-year-old mother “lean into each other,”¹⁷¹ the “deep v-front” of her mother’s costume edged with “hand-pinked grosgrain ribbon.”¹⁷² What punctures Sharpe is her mother’s homemade costume next to the mended tears in her grandmother’s dress, the poise of her grandmother’s shoes – but most especially, her mother’s hands, “elegant even as a child”¹⁷³ (“the shapes they trace in the air when she speaks, and then again when she is still and listening”¹⁷⁴).

(Sharpe finds hands everywhere: in Devin Allen’s photographs, she “trace[s] a language of hands;”¹⁷⁵ at a Malik Sidibe show, she “took photographs of all the hands,” and a “whole

¹⁶⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 40.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ “Choice, and all its attendant energy,” writes Mary Ruefle, “is characteristic of youth. It is before one chooses that one feels desire and longing without fulfillment” (Mary Ruefle, *Madness, Rack, and Honey: Collected Lectures* (Wave Books, 2012), 71).

¹⁶⁹ Christina Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023), 80.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 85. Her mother gave her a copy of *The Salt Eaters* by Toni Cade Bambaras, who thanks her own mother in the dedication, “who, having come upon me daydreaming in the middle of the kitchen floor, mopped around me.”

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

expressive language of gesture emerged.”¹⁷⁶ “This is a love letter to my mother,” she writes, in her book’s final line.¹⁷⁷ Its final image: a painting of her mother’s hands, which had a “grace and a language of their own,”¹⁷⁸ which Sharpe had always wanted to photograph, until it was “too late to photograph the beautiful aliveness of my mother’s hands.”¹⁷⁹)

Though Sharpe engages with Barthes’ work, she clarifies his look – “his look. Not a look or the look”¹⁸⁰ – as a gaze, one which holds the “racist logics of coloniality”¹⁸¹ and “all of the ordering structures of white supremacy.”¹⁸² By deciding to derive the essence of all photography from one photograph, and then trying to extend this “universal taxonomy” to more case studies – many of them photographs of Black people from colonial archives – Barthes enacts a “misnaming and mis-seeing.”¹⁸³ He “refuses to know” his own racist looking.¹⁸⁴ When James VanDerZee’s aunt’s pearl necklace “becomes a gold chain” in Barthes’ description, his failure is threefold: he “unsees” the aunt, Blackness, and the violence of his own claim at universality.¹⁸⁵ He “could only misread” the Halloween photograph of Sharpe’s mother and grandmother, Sharpe writes.¹⁸⁶ He “would never consider the word *elegance* in relation to that photo of James VanDerZee’s family. Or mine.”¹⁸⁷ He would never “see the beautiful, elegant life as deeply Black,” elegance itself not as “the province of leisure or the domain of wealth” but as “the persistence of style.”¹⁸⁸

—

The hands of matrilineage retrieve, repeat, their persistent elegance clapping louder than Barthes in their doubling: Chew-Bose’s grandmother’s hand, “tucked [...] so elegantly that conjured quick in my mind are replicas of her hands everywhere: pawing piano keys, buffing brass, folding a handkerchief on its diagonal just so;”¹⁸⁹ Said’s grandmother’s hands, her left always holding “a small rolled-up handkerchief in the palm next to the thumb,” from which lavender candy unfurled;¹⁹⁰ Sharpe’s writing losing its breath at “their hands—.”¹⁹¹ Of her mother’s “cupped” hands, “fingers not quite touching,” she asks, “*Where did she learn that?*”¹⁹²

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 258.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 351.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 207.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 179.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid., 170.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 184.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 179.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 184.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 179.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 185.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood*, 29.

¹⁹⁰ Said, *Out of Place*, 17.

¹⁹¹ Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, 192.

¹⁹² Ibid., 195.

Yanyi: “Resonance is like two hands dipped in each other, the sudden rise of volume.”¹⁹³

—

Dear Lee,

When I first moved here, the kitchen was in complete disuse – standing freezer unplugged, cupboards sticky – but the plastic bags she’d left were cleaned and folded (tarp in the open trunk, neat). In a cabinet in the wall, on a narrow shelf I called my apartment, she’d left a roll of gauze, grumpy bottle of Advil, a bike pump needle ringing around a lidless jar. My stuff didn’t arrive for the first month, so this is what I arranged. It was what I had. Moving it meant something.

“The work of inhabitation,” writes Ahmed, means “extending” the body to create “new folds” and “contours” of “liveable or *inhabitable* space.”¹⁹⁴ And this extension is not inevitable; it does “take work.”¹⁹⁵ It “has to be repeated,” Ahmed writes of “the act of tending toward other women.”¹⁹⁶ It has to be repeated, the act of tending toward the slow accumulation of self, “the ways I endeavour,” as Salamon writes of the phenomenological trans body, “to make a *habitable* thing of it.”¹⁹⁷

“As in, I am worth the work of transformations,” writes Yanyi. “As in, I do not fear how I will emerge from myself, or how many times.”¹⁹⁸

If we allow these resonances to dip into each other, to rise in volume, the work of inhabitation, is, at least in part, the work of making a habitable thing of the body through the folds and contours of habitable space. In other words, as the body “takes the shape” of its repetitions, gets “twisted into shapes that enable some action”¹⁹⁹ and shapes space, the shape of space emerges, repeats, and in turn shapes the body. Inhabitation as “becoming part of a space where one has expanded one’s body, saturating the space with bodily matter;” or: “Home as overflowing and flowing over.”²⁰⁰ In the purposefulness of domesticity, the body “cannot be thought as more proximate to

¹⁹³ Yanyi, *The Year of Blue Water*, 38.

¹⁹⁴ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 12. Emphasis mine.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 59.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 102.

¹⁹⁷ Salamon, “The Sexual Schema,” 56. Emphasis mine.

¹⁹⁸ Yanyi. *The Year of Blue Water*, 57.

¹⁹⁹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 91.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 11.

me than [that] world” – or song, or show – “through which my body moves,”²⁰¹ toward which my body bends,”²⁰² within which my body lives. It settles outside of strict distinctions – in fact, “the distinction between one’s body and the world ceases to have meaning” entirely.²⁰³

—

The negation of photographs on the wall in Ahmed’s family home “do not capture what is not there.”²⁰⁴ What pulls in *To Look Without Fear*, Tillman’s photography retrospective, is that it is one accrual of the queer inverse, the objects of the “gesture through which I am toward the other,” accumulated.²⁰⁵ What, when it meets in bigger and bigger assemblages, longer and longer lists – Ann and I, following the stretch of our hands, shuttering, tuck-tuck, with the sound of a train going by, swirling with the wrinkle at the middle of turning,²⁰⁶ the humid curl of an armpit,²⁰⁷ fingers out, zooming in;²⁰⁸ as, just before we spotted the sun setting between pillars,²⁰⁹ a woman with a sun on her chest said, “people come together;” as the colour came together on her body; as Tillmann’s photographs bent into themselves; as, like early daguerreotype subjects, who “live[d] their way into, rather than out of, the moment,”²¹⁰ they swelled and converged on time’s ongoing precipice; as we went out onto the stairs as the only true peach half melted – it collects into a narrative which “irresistibly evokes relationships among its disparate elements.”²¹¹

In other words, as the objects accumulate, narrative forms.²¹² In this formulation, writes Peter Schwenger, the mind forms collections into a kind of breccia,²¹³ linking entities that “demand[...]

²⁰¹ Salamon, “The Sexual Schema,” 54.

²⁰² Ibid., 60.

²⁰³ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 12.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 38.

²⁰⁵ Merleau-Ponty, quoted in Salamon, “The Sexual Schema,” 54.

²⁰⁶ Wolfgang Tillmans, *Peas*, video, 2003. <https://jsfoundation.art/videos/wolfgang-tillmans-peas/>

²⁰⁷ Wolfgang Tillmans, *Armpit*, photograph, 1992. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/164447>

²⁰⁸ Like the first time at the grocery store after the first months of illness, father and son’s easel legs in the mustard aisle, pyramids of sinking oranges, the sunset I would have missed if not for “Melissa!”

²⁰⁹ Chew-Bose: “Did I finally admit defeat and stop photographing sunsets?” (Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood*, 75)

²¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2008), 280.

²¹¹ Schwenger, *The Tears of Things*, 143.

²¹² For Ahmed, orientations are cumulative: they are “effects of what we tend toward” through time, and it is by following these orientations “that we might acquire our sense of who it is that we are.” (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 20) For Merleau-Ponty, sexuality is “the organization of desire across different temporal modes and into a narrative coherence.” (in Salamon, “The Sexual Schema,” 44)

²¹³ ⁸¹ a rock composed of fragments within a “binding medium” (Schwenger, *The Tears of Things*, 143.)

an otherness at the heart of similarity,”²¹⁴ slowing down time within which the mind can “play in the spaces where meaning is not,” often “dart[ing] into personal memory and beyond into the unconscious.”²¹⁵ Alex’s face twice on one wall, Ann and I skipping rock-minds across four photographs:²¹⁶ two linked by purple, the next two by fuzz, the next two by an angle turned back.²¹⁷

—

In these objects’ accumulation, in their larger and larger assemblages, even as the muscle memory of the old repetition, the archaic adherence to “the heterosexual line,” may try to make brash or instantaneous – a mistake – out of what has been building internally for a long time, the external repetition of objects in a row keep the score.²¹⁸ I found my drawing, peach olive grey; I stored it on top of the photo of us. The letter you sent from the fountain, the dancers. (Yanyi: “The male dancers are paired with other male dancers. They dance in a way that echoes sameness.”²¹⁹ The air danced, the roses.)

Because the lost alternative “might not even be admitted as loss,” it can be difficult, over time, to remember its absence as absence.²²⁰ But the objects remember. The drawing on top of the letter. The plank on top of the car. The band-aids from my T injections I kept under a superstition bag (which I found, folded and cleaned, in that kitchen) pushed to the back of my desk, until I finished my first bottle. We hold something down with something else. Such that the material of our lives slowly stops the drift. Dams. The objects are their own proof: the material the insistent, ongoing evidence of a whole trajectory of thought preceding it.²²¹

The bedroom’s saturated space, built from the “pleasures of repetition,” is more directly an extension of the truth of the trans self.²²² The material of our choices accumulate *us*. The objects

²¹⁴ Ibid., 144.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 146.

²¹⁶ The ones on the edges utterly different, the same way speakers of neighbouring dialects can understand each other, but not those on the outermost edges. (See e.g. Wilbert Heeringa and John Nerbonne, “Dialect areas and dialect continua.” *Language variation and change* 13, no. 3 (2001): 375.)

²¹⁷ Wolfgang Tillmans, *Wolfgang Tillmans: To Look Without Fear*. Art Gallery of Ontario, April 7, 2023 - October 1, 2023.

²¹⁸ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 94.

²¹⁹ Yanyi, *The Year of Blue Water*, 62.

²²⁰ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*. 90.

²²¹ T Fleischmann: “At the time i thought: building things, and growing things, and hammer, and tomatoes. It was only a year or so, however, before learning how to wing a hammer let me thinking *i am the one who makes my body different* and before I knelt in dirt and placed my hands on rock and decided to start dropping little blue pills underneath my tongue when I woke, to take more control over my future body.” (T Fleischmann, *Time is the thing a body moves through* (Coffee House Press, 2019), 12.)

²²² Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 102.

holding us down hold us down with our own body weight. I said the same wish for years, such that I could see my slow orbit above it. Behind it, above it, in front.

—

Ahmed, following Frantz Fanon, recalls that race and history are inherent to the distances and proximities “behind” the movement of the phenomenological body.²²³ Because public spaces, like this phenomenological body, “take shape” through “habitual action,” repetition, work (again, not a given, but which “become given, as an effect of the repetition of decisions made over time”), whiteness, Ahmed identifies, becomes a kind of social “behind,” structuring our worlds and institutions.²²⁴

White institutions, orientated “around” whiteness instead of “towards” it, allow whiteness to “cohere” as what goes “unnoticed,”²²⁵ and, as a result, white people, “adher[ing] to form the edges of such spaces,” do not have to “face their [own] whiteness.”²²⁶ White queer culture especially often unsees its own specificity – an invisibilizing of race under the marker of some modicum of marginality.

What is *not* within reach, what is *not* near enough in the accumulation of a white cis gay man’s life in a white institution like the AGO? If whiteness, too, is inherited through “the very placement of things,” which mouths, which hands, which paintings of mothers and children, which photographs of which queer lives, are still not granted the institutional space to place, repeat, accumulate, shape?²²⁷ How can I, a white queer person, write towards resonance without claiming a lazy, racist, Barthesian universality that unsees itself, and without forgetting the larger imperative: to ongoingly visibilize and disrupt the very specific proximity and placement of things, instead of allowing it to fester as “what is assumed to be given”?²²⁸

—

What is up-close is not “more true;” “what I am’ I am only at a distance, yonder,” writes Merleau-Ponty, as he shrinks.²²⁹ “Tillmans plans his exhibitions using scale dioramas,” I told my

²²³ Sara Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness.” *Feminist theory* 8, no. 2. 2007. 153.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

²²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, quoted in Salamon, “The Sexual Schema,” 60.

friends,²³⁰ “so we’re small, and there he is, big above us,” as we shrank.²³¹ There we were, big above us, when I visited Ann on her 32nd floor, and saw the little arms hinge to the gallery. When Florence and I found a scale model at a tourist attraction; the gallery’s staircases on the wrong side, where we’d faced the small sky. “The close, the far off, the horizon,” the hands, the arms, the joints of buildings, “in their indescribable contrast form a system” – which meets.²³²

The links of the system winnow down to wasp legs. An object shrinks to the brittle outline of a word, down to the “beautiful cell” of the esthetic, which, to José Ortega y Gasset, is metaphor.²³³ Metaphor: two words in a row, two photographs on a wall, which “initially repel one another,” between which lies “a coincidence [...] more profound and decisive than any resemblance.”²³⁴

To Chew-Bose, the beautiful cell of Tillmans’ photography, its “thrumming, natural centre,” is green.²³⁵ In his work, she writes, “green is a big wayward leaf, sneaking in but staying out of focus,” “bodily,” confessional of time passing,” “lush or parched.”²³⁶ It is a “marker of desire;” it “registers and then lingers but is never acquired.”²³⁷ It murmurs beneath the crust of the ground.

Green’s center stays out of focus, lingers but is never acquired, because it emerges only in the coincidence of complement. Like the green ball rolling between red tables, the child smacking a sound the mother knows means “bicycle.” Like when I reread *Heart Hospital*, and there is Bruegel’s tomato red soup, but also, suddenly, a green soup, eaten with a friend: “Greeeeeen, we said, as if it were slime.”²³⁸ The two colours taking place simultaneously, each altering the other.

Because Ortega contends that everything is experienced remotely²³⁹ (“most of the time we encounter objects from the outside in third person perceptions or descriptions”), he is of the mind

²³⁰ Wolfgang Tillmans, “Wolfgang Tillmans – ‘What Art Does in Me Is beyond Words’: Artist Interview: Tateshots.” YouTube, January 27, 2017. <https://youtu.be/aYIXGdoTwWA?si=M8RPKceHJ-rlcHVB>.

²³¹ Nick followed my finger and there it was, what we’d been looking for. A photograph hung “nine foot high.” This is the tallest exhibition I’ve ever had, Tillmans had said. That’s where he found us, in front of *Deer Hirsch*. The angle legs, the antler hands. It was mostly sounds, gestures; we antlered.

²³² Merleau-Ponty, quoted Salamon, “The Sexual Schema,” 60.

²³³ José Ortega y Gasset, quoted in Greg Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (Pelican, 2018), 73.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Chew-Bose, “The Day Came Fat with an Apple in its Mouth,” 235.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Chew-Bose, *Too Much and not the Mood*, 55.

²³⁹ It is worth noting that Ortega might object to being included in an essay with Ahmed. Their philosophical groundings are at odds: Ortega, from Kant, believes in a fundamental inaccessibility of what we perceive, whereas Ahmed writes from Husserl, who argues that we need only focus on the truth of our experience as a site of inquiry in and of itself. I sidestep resolving this for now; my interest is not in whether things are ultimately fundamentally inaccessible, only that there are degrees of proximity, as well as different directions

that the metaphor only *seems* to dig down to Kant's unreachable "things in themselves."²⁴⁰ When he takes a metaphor likening a cypress tree to the "ghost of a dead flame," and watches as the cypress and flame "initially repel one another," then "collide," their "hard carapaces crack[ing]," "molten," forming a new entity "ready to receive a new form and structure," the green, to him, remains unacquired.²⁴¹ There is still a gap in the "inscrutable void where the cypress used to be."²⁴²

But for Greg Harman, metaphor's beautiful cell does not dig down at all; instead, it stacks "upward to a higher layer," big above us, and replaces the "absent cypress" with what is "never absent from our experience of art": "namely, we ourselves."²⁴³ When the repellant colours collide in metaphor, the "internal matter" between them now "molten" with "the softness of plasm," "ready to receive a new form and structure," that new form and structure is us.²⁴⁴ We replace the absent cypress, the absent green; we "become the new object generated by the metaphor," the "compound" somewhere between complements.²⁴⁵ We "place ourselves on that table."²⁴⁶

We become the word-object, the word-object becomes us; the gap between words is important. We reach, become purposefulness; it is the gap we become. It is what Merleau-Ponty calls flesh: an aspect of embodiment that is "not quite the body" and not quite the world,²⁴⁷ the molten thing which "we form our bodies into."²⁴⁸ "[Tillmans'] references are flipped," Chew-Bose writes, as she flips the references, as "a pomegranate is corpselike;" "potatoes are cherubic," birth and death, body and desire, coinciding in flesh of the gap.²⁴⁹

What merges in flesh, the "chiasmic crossing" Merleau-Ponty calls transposition, which "transforms both body and desire" as each of them "comes to stand in the other's place," is, he writes, "assuredly not a linguistic substitution": it is "unspoken," "unthought and nearly reflexive."²⁵⁰ But "to become flesh is to enter the world and engage with it so fully that the distinction between one's body and the world ceases to have meaning," and that includes engaging so fully with grief ankles as small as the objects of words that we become them, so

of movement, and that, by moving through ekphrastic language/grief ankles, we can move towards ourselves.

²⁴⁰ Greg Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (Pelican, 2018), 73.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁴⁴ Ortega y Gasset, quoted in Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 73.

²⁴⁵ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 88.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁴⁷ Salamon, "The Sexual Schema," 59.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁴⁹ Chew-Bose, "The Day Came Fat with an Apple in its Mouth," 235.

²⁵⁰ Merleau-Ponty, quoted in Salamon, "The Sexual Schema," 52.

fully that the distinction between body and word ceases to have meaning.²⁵¹ Words which – in Kristeva’s semiotic, in Lacan’s *lalangue* – contain the full grief of what is unthought, unspoken, and reflexive in the cry of a child down a hall. The body is not lost in the linguistic substitution of Lacan’s unconscious, in those signifiers standing in for “the One,” in the “network bearing a hole,” that only the mouth can know.²⁵² We become the absent cypress, the absent green, the signifier standing in the place of the One, the gap of the lack that is left, the “compound” somewhere between complements – all of which is *part* of that system of “the close, the far off, the horizon,” “the total field that is the perceptual truth.”²⁵³

A morpheme is the smallest meaningful unit in a language.²⁵⁴ The smallest meaningful unit that the self can pass through – which does not necessarily “map onto the morphology” of the body,²⁵⁵ is not even necessarily “organically attached to the body,”²⁵⁶ the common morph- in morphology and morpheme coming from “form,” “shape”²⁵⁷ – is the juxtaposition of a word and a word. And as metaphors crack, as references flip, taking place simultaneously, altering each other, the linkages accumulate, demanding otherness at the heart of similarity, building up to narrative. The word-objects accumulate, on their own scale, as the books, cheek to cheek on a shelf, make their meaning of us. The space we become as the space becomes us. Ahmed, relishing the “anonymity of bare walls, untouched by the faces of loved ones that throw the body into another time and place.”²⁵⁸ Yanyi, putting up a poster on his first wall, thinking, “There are more ways I can be here. There are things I have not done.”²⁵⁹

—

In *Lutz and Alex sitting in the trees*, the leaves are wide, surface-area spread.²⁶⁰ Lutz and Alex, each in their branch, toes turning, Lutz in a red jacket, Alex a green one, Alex’s shoulders tense up to hold green’s emergence. Their open torsos, same flesh glowing, same dense starburst of sternum. Their same hair, same size of their frame, the shine of Lutz’ jacket on Alex’s knee, kneecap a knuckle, leg a little finger, joints cracking tiny, chlorophyll, postcard in my room, humid green between couch handles, *Deer Hirsch* behind the big wayward nod of my money tree. I rearrange the wasp in the line of the rocks. The distinction “dissolve[s], enacting the confusion that will become transcendence,” the repelling that will become molten, the self not-

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Nasio, *Five Lessons on the Psychoanalytic Theory of Jacques Lacan*, 57.

²⁵³ Salamon, “The Sexual Schema,” 60.

²⁵⁴ Dwight L. Bolinger, “On defining the morpheme.” *Word* 4, no. 1 (1948): 18.

²⁵⁵ Salamon, “The Sexual Schema,” 47.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 51.

²⁵⁷ Peter Hugoe Matthews, *Morphology*. (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 8.

²⁵⁸ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 11.

²⁵⁹ Yanyi, *The Year of Blue Water*, 8.

²⁶⁰ Wolfgang Tillmans, *Lutz & Alex sitting in the trees*, photograph. 1992.

yet-become that becomes.²⁶¹ Peach olive grey. Hand to accumulation. We look for patterns in everything. We want to mean. We repeat ourselves through the rhythm of solid.

²⁶¹ Salamon, "The Sexual Schema," 55.

The morning of the first counterprotest, I woke up early and did not complain.²⁶² The yellow that shades my back was diluted. I put on my slow layers. The binder I did not need but wore to remember. To hold something down. It was so bright. The brightness was heavy. I could not yell, but I stood with my arms high like the day when the day-warmed asphalt pulled me to the alley, people coming together around a dog at one end, kids in a line with yellow ice cream at the other, the pink sky moving, the blue sky thick with the half moon – the day when we were the wrinkle at the centre of turning, Florence in the upstairs bathroom, leaning into the mirror, her hair up, rarely. She clicked the light off and saw me. We laughed to be so far from each other, proximal housemates turned little arms hinging, our whole lives once “thought by itself, yet [had] been unnamable,” sprouted from each of our slightest pivots, net to this sprawl, bending into itself, knocked into view by the moment of — hands up, fingers, a sign made of old garage sale posters, one red, one green.²⁶³ I made extra for Miranda and Florence. I brought pears for the each of us. My mother crouched down close to me on the phone, warm fragrant, and near. The mug we still have, the kettle we don’t. The pears bobbed in the bowl of my chest. I had no questions about momentum. I was not afraid of the lift of my fear. What I was, only at a distance, approaching. I found Vannessa in the crowd. I held the melt in the middle of V’s soft arm.

²⁶² On September 20, 2023, anti-LGBTQ+ protests across Canada were met with (often larger, especially in metropolitan centres) counter-protests.

²⁶³ Salamon, “The Sexual Schema,” 55.

Part 3: The Bed is a Word that is Already Here: Sculpture, Doing Disability Justice & Where Ekphrasis Goes

In the room where I was the sickest, there was a shrine. The bird nightlight, the dead frog, the little red box. A ribbon glued to a stick, making its border. Years later, in the kitchen with the yellow chair, I cared for your and Vi-An's cat. I cried in front of your pantry. All the right spices, three kinds of seaweed, that one from the Maritimes so bitter it drew out the spit. Years later, in the kitchen with the table set longwise, we decorated for Vi-An's birthday with flowers that crinkled by morning. The pear, turning red from its green, turning possible.

*While discussing their collaboratively written *The Undercommons*, Fred Moten says to Stefano Harney, "It's not as much having a shoebox in which I'm writing down my thoughts as that I'm having a long conversation with a few people."²⁶⁴ This chapter's accumulation is not chapter two's solitary shoebox, but the ekphrasis of a long conversation. The "ongoing process of talking with somebody else," the "one or two things that I've been talking about with people forever."²⁶⁵*

Dear Trynne,

When she ran away from home, Claudia decided she would not run "from somewhere," but "to somewhere."²⁶⁶ the MOMA. There, violin case stuffed with socks, she found a sculpture I could not see. The angel, she called it. Under the drooping red of the canopy bed: something just for her. When we watched the movie adaptation in Mrs. Ryan's class, I was horrified. The angel was small, twisted, no light in its turning. It was all wrong— I could see it.

When Max runs away from home, as Jack Halberstam writes in the introduction to the *Undercommons*, he finds "what is included and what is left out" between the world "his mother rules" and the "ruined world of the wild."²⁶⁷ So he sets out again for somewhere else: "neither the home he left nor the home to which he wants to return."²⁶⁸

We ran away from home the summer we met. We could not return to any world: not to the memory of our mother's mouths, the "names we use for why care is privatized in our society,"²⁶⁹ as family abolitionist Sophie Lewis puts it, nor to the archaic torso of the AGO, the university,

²⁶⁴ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013), 103.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Elaine Lobl Konigsburg, *From the mixed-up files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* (Simon and Schuster, 1967), 1.

²⁶⁷ Jack Halberstam, "'The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons,'" in Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 14.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Sophie Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (Verso Books, 2022), 14.

the structures that “limi[t] our ability to find each other, to see beyond [them],” as Halberstam puts it.²⁷⁰ We could not return to the memory of the angel we had already seen. We had to stretch beyond it.

What exactly is beyond, is, maybe, unclear. We can’t fully imagine the next thing because, as Lewis writes, “Our very capacity to understand these events was generated by them.”²⁷¹ As Halberstam writes, “once we have torn shit down,” we will open out to “a new sense of wanting and being and becoming.”²⁷² But it’s more than a “simple deletion” of what’s here.²⁷³ It will be, as abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes, not just the “absence of something,” but the “presence of something,”²⁷⁴ it will be, Sophie Lewis hopes, “a glorious, abundant nothing.”²⁷⁵

So, two weeks before I hurt my grief ankle, we made a mission of nothing. We found a woman’s wallet, the longest hopscotch on record, a sculpture of a purple elephant that a child knew used to be yellow. *Every summer is every summer*, said my crush then. *Every summer is every summer and there is no one to tell*, I repeated, ribbons around my feet.

There is someone to tell. Our first emails were quick: your phone number, a place to meet, a short regret. You said you liked encountering work between mediums. You told me that, in your dream, you made me vegan vanilla pear compote swirl ice cream. You said that it was sad, that Vi-An was also there.

Now we are far; our emails are long. Our phone calls are Fridays. We describe over the phone what we see, what is there, what is not – not-yet, not-ever – even when there is only one word, even when we are lying down. We are world building. We are walking around it. We stand on both sides of it, sleepover voices in the dark, granting it dimension.

Disability justice scholar Leah Piepzna-Samarasinha: “There is no place where [disability justice] is waiting, ready-made. There is what we make.”²⁷⁶

—

What we make: our beds, our bed-world, what queer theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz calls queer utopia, a Blochian “concrete” utopia which emerges from the “hopes of a collective, an emergent group, or even the solitary oddball who is the one who dreams for many,” a horizon which, by

²⁷⁰ Halberstam, ““The Wild Beyond,” in Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 13.

²⁷¹ Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 14.

²⁷² Halberstam, ““The Wild Beyond,” in Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 13.

²⁷³ Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 81.

²⁷⁴ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, quoted in Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 81.

²⁷⁵ Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 81.

²⁷⁶ Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *The Future is Disabled* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2022), 94.

definition, we will never reach.²⁷⁷ This gap, between us and our “horizons of being,”²⁷⁸ impels us to “squint,” “to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now.”²⁷⁹ It is that very ongoing distance – the “surplus of both affect and meaning” that fills it – that propels us toward a different future.²⁸⁰

The “mark” of this utopian, he quotes from Barthes, is “in the quotidian.”²⁸¹ When you visit, we make soup in big blue,²⁸² the pot we found the same day we found the carved duck with a baby on its back (The duck opened; it was, we learned, a humidor). We stir the soup’s horizon, heads under our nap-tents. We get up periodically to put our eyeballs in the hole at the centre of the duck.

An “impulse we see in everyday life,”²⁸³ the utopian is an impulse toward a horizon, too, for disability justice and culture.²⁸⁴ As Jane Blocker puts it, writing about the “picture-poems” Kenneth Patchen made from his bed, the bed is “a utopia, not a place,”²⁸⁵ a pushed-in centre that ongoingly recedes.

(Another sculpture: disability aesthetics scholar Tobin Sieber asks, Would the armless Venus de Milo, who “eschews the uniformity of perfect bodies to embrace the variety of disability, still be considered one of the great examples of both aesthetic and human beauty if she had both her arms?”)²⁸⁶

—

Alt text/image description, linguistic translations whose intention is to make the visual accessible for blind/low vision people and those who use screen readers, are a convergence of poetry and translation,²⁸⁷ of text and image, an everyday impulse, an instance of ekphrasis made clearly

²⁷⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3.

²⁷⁸ A term he pulls from Husserl’s phenomenology, whom Sara Ahmed writes from in chapter 2.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁸¹ Roland Barthes, quoted in Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 25.

²⁸² which itself is a Nivi word, a reference to the big blues (my grandmother’s planters) I gave to Nivi when I moved.

²⁸³ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 25.

²⁸⁴ This insight is indebted to Sean Lee “Episode 4.22 Disability Art is the Last Avant-Garde with Sean Lee.” *The Secret Feminist Agenda Podcast*, 2020.

²⁸⁵ Jane Blocker, “The Bed Took up Most of the Room.” *The Ends of Performance* (New York University Press, 1998), 265.

²⁸⁶ Tobin Siebers. *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 5.

²⁸⁷ As Finnegan Shannon and Bojana Coklyat make explicit in their project Alt Text as Poetry, alt text is related to both poetry (in its “attention to language,” “word economy,” and “experimental spirit”) and translation (in that “information is both lost and gained,” “there is no single correct answer” for its formulation, and that it “always involves creative decisions”). (Bojana Coklyat and Shannon Finnegan, “Alt Text as Poetry Project, *Curating Access*, (Routledge, 2022), 278.)

useful. They are a curt increment towards “better and more nuanced accessibility” in the construction of our mutual horizons.²⁸⁸ As Della Pollock writes of performative writing, this kind of ekphrasis exceeds “its determination within structures of absence/presence in order to perform a social function.”²⁸⁹ It is writing that “does,” that renders “absence present” not by referencing “a given or ‘old’ world,” but by writing “into a new one.”²⁹⁰ In other words, as a form of ekphrasis which straightforwardly does, image description might be understood to be a basic unit for, as Muñoz writes of the manifesto, “*do[ing]* utopia.”²⁹¹

—

Image description of you from when our emails were short: “Trynne’s feet in grey socks stick out from porch railings over a street. The checkered light on their shins is bright soft, early summer, and the leaves gleam tremulous in a way that you can’t really notice unless it isn’t the season.”²⁹²

Video description of you from when our emails were long: “Trynne, held by Vi-An’s sunfeet, turns.”²⁹³

—

After the artist Georgina Kleege’s orthodontist appointments as a teenager, she and her mother would meet at the MOMA (Claudia with her fictional feet up on the toilet to hide from the night guards). Their usual meeting place was Henri Matisse’s painting *The Red Studio*, “which my mother never tired of looking at.”²⁹⁴ When comparing the MOMA’s audio tours for the blind/low vision, children, and what she calls the “mainstream” audio tour, Kleege, who herself is blind, begins with descriptions of this red, hoping to trouble the goal of “objective neutrality” in accessible description, but also hoping these overlapping descriptions might “somehow give [her] an insight into her [mother’s] response to this painting”²⁹⁵ (echoing Durga Chew-Bose’s unaskable red in the red in the red of her mother’s mouth: “if she did [...] like me, consider [...] how the cherry liqueur gets inside the chocolate”).²⁹⁶

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Della Pollock, “Performing Writing,” in *The Ends of Performance* (New York University Press, 1998), 76.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 80.

²⁹¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 27.

²⁹² EJ Kneifel (@ejkneifel), “Trynne’s Legs in May,” Instagram, September 23, 2021.

²⁹³ EJ Kneifel (@ejkneifel), “Trynne in March,” Instagram, March 5, 2022.

²⁹⁴ Georgina Kleege, *More than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 111.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood*, 65.

The children's audio track shares that Matisse's studio was actually white, and emphasizes that Matisse's materials ("a box of crayons") stand out from the red – "one way that Matisse lets us know that making art was important to him."²⁹⁷ In the "mainstream" tour, red is a way of "organizing the space," functioning "a bit like the medium of time," or object- openings, "where all these things are floating but open up into different worlds."²⁹⁸ The description for the blind/low vision, on the other hand, describes Matisse "flood[ing] the canvas with red, a rich, deep red, like tomato soup."²⁹⁹ (I jumped at tomato soup, thinking of Chew-Bose's childhood Bruegel, but) Kleege understandably bristles at this simile. She asks, "Is there an assumption that blind people will respond more readily to a reference to a nonvisual sense, [...] while sighted people can make the figurative leap to the medium of time?"³⁰⁰

During another visit to the MOMA, a touch tour facilitator offhandedly shared with Kleege the theory that this red room might have emerged in the smack of its complement: that Matisse might have been painting a retinal after-image, the white walls of his studio turned red after returning from his "lush green garden outside."³⁰¹ This theory touches Kleege, because it matches her own experience of colour, as someone able to perceive "large expanses of highly saturated colour."³⁰² It is also a special moment of ekphrastic connection because it was built, crucially, in conversation.

In other words, the ekphrasis that truly does utopia – more than the melancholic's mimetic self-reference (of part 1), more than the pile of belongings "vibrat[ing] with ... the subject's angst ridden relationship to [it]" (of part 2)³⁰³ – is itself a meeting place:

Kleege and her mother at the red painting;

Kleege and the touch tour facilitator at the red painting;

The art educator Georgia Krantz, who learned to give low-vision visitors at the Guggenheim first a basic description, then to ask, "What else can I describe to help create a more complete picture?"³⁰⁴

²⁹⁷ Kleege, *More than Meets the Eye*, 114.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 117.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Schwenger, *The Tears of Things*, 163.

³⁰⁴ Kleege, *More than Meets the Eye*, 118.

The meeting place of our voices, the lost object in your mouth as you speak it, stuck in your teeth, tongue bit through, always moving to the next crouch to trill.³⁰⁵ As they meet. As we meet. The two of us, in bed, on the phone. (“Every place two disabled people meet at a kitchen table, on heating pads in bed talking to our loves,” writes Piepzna-Samarasinha, is where “disability justice exists.”)³⁰⁶

From that meeting point, the patterns accumulate. Because we found a purple sculpture with a yellow core, I find you in an image description of “a sea of purple aster flowers, with round yellow centers.”³⁰⁷ Which reminds me of RJ, for whom I collect purple mail: purple butterfly on purple tape, purple flower in my rush, purple pepper given to me by the trans gardener. For Vannessa, orange piles. For Vida, pink cars. I used to send all the matched outfit twins to another summer crush; now, you and Vi-An visit, twins in black socks on my bed. A pattern is not only a pattern if it is shared – but it is a way to find someone else everywhere. Or: Anywhere can be a meeting place if we have the same place in mind.

—

In the subfield of linguistics called pragmatics, the word for what is built from that meeting point is the common ground, information “considered part of the interlocutors’ shared background,” a background which grows behind us, around us, as we share it, as we move toward the horizon of each other.³⁰⁸ Teukie Martin’s word for the pattern is “care linguistics,” a “dialogical process” in which each cares and receives care, cyclically, iteratively, towards a mutual “care fluency.” (Claudia’s word for what happened “invisibly”: “they became a team.” (“You might call it *caring*. You could even call it *love*.”)).³⁰⁹ Audre Lorde’s word, the erotic, a force that comes from “sharing deeply any pursuit with another person”: “a longed-for bed.”³¹⁰

The most important thing, really, is that the word is shared – and when it is shared, it sounds different.

³⁰⁵ In phonetics, a trill is a series of quick flaps of the tongue, lips, or uvula against another part of the mouth. (See e.g. Peter Ladefoged, Anne Cochran, and Sandra Disner. “Laterals and trills.” *Journal of the International Phonetic Association* 7, no. 2 (1977): 46-54.)

³⁰⁶ Piepzna-Samarasinha, *The Future is Disabled*, 160.

³⁰⁷ Justin Allen, “Alt Text Study Club.” 2018. <https://alt-text-as-poetry.net/blog/>

³⁰⁸ Betty J. Birner, *Introduction to Pragmatics* (Wiley Blackwell: Blackwell Textbooks in Linguistics, 2015), 67.

³⁰⁹ Konigsburg, *From the Mixed-Up Files*, 39.

³¹⁰ Lorde, Audre. *Uses of the erotic: The erotic as power. Vol. 2000.* (Brooklyn, NY: Out & Out Books, 1978.) 2.

When the blind photographer Alice Wingwall's husband uses their shared architectural jargon in his image descriptions, making them "meaningful to her, though not necessarily to others," it sounds different.³¹¹

When Moten and Harney use the words of their book – *debt, credit, study – the undercommons*, a place in and outside the memory of the university, that "other world"³¹² of study, the "always elsewhere"³¹³ where "we move next to each other, so we can be beside ourselves"³¹⁴ – it sounds different. "They're building something in there, something down there ... in a squat, a dump, a woods, *a bed*, an embrace"³¹⁵ – and "you will find that you were already in it all along."³¹⁶

It sounds different when we say the words we built in here, where we have been all along. When we say big blue, loser behaviour, toilet couch, we are referring to something familiar. Like the gap in the corridor between us, it is the thrust toward our own language. Like the field of heterosexual objects, it is built from our own accumulation. As Moten puts it, "you literally come to terms together."³¹⁷ We fill up the common ground, this not-place, "and the bed takes up most of the room."³¹⁸

—

Muñoz' utopic work is not about ekphrasis, but in his introductory chapter he turns to a James Schuyler poem that emerges from a description of a photograph. Its descriptive mimesis ("it looks so like you")³¹⁹ retrieves memories of last Friday, and quickly builds to an "affective excess,"³²⁰ a "call for 'doing,'"³²¹ an imperative, the "enabling force"³²² for another kind of futurity: a world where we can "live without the in- / tervals of anxious / fear we know between our / bouts and strolls of/ ecstasy." (both the immediate ecstasy of "my strange scream," as well as "another kind, that you / know only in retrospect": when "his feet were in my lap" (your shins, light tremulous, can't really notice unless it isn't the season.))³²³

³¹¹ Kleege, *More than Meets the Eye*, 120.

³¹² Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 15.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 49.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 74. Emphasis mine.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

³¹⁸ Blocker, "The Bed Took up Most of the Room," 265.

³¹⁹ James Schuyler, quoted in Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 23.

³²⁰ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 23.

³²¹ *Ibid.*

³²² *Ibid.*

³²³ James Schuyler, quoted in Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 23.

The past “(having-been), the future “(the not-yet),” and the present “(the making-present)” converge, for Muñoz, in this “temporal unity” of queer utopian ecstasy.³²⁴ It is the “interface”³²⁵ between the “no longer conscious” and the “not yet” in the present – not the “singular shattering” of the statue of Saint Theresa (“affective transport chiseled in her face”³²⁶), but the “singular-plural” of the social,³²⁷ a glimpse, an “anticipatory illumination,” in temporal alignment’s triple convergence.³²⁸

WJT Mitchell’s model for “utopian fantasies like ekphrasis”³²⁹ is a meeting point at the centre of another three: what he calls ekphrastic hope (for visual-linguistic unity), fear (of that unity), and indifference (after its collapse), expressing our own “anxieties about merging with others.”³³⁰

Fear and hope also dangle at the intersection of utopic ecstasy; for Bloch, fear is hope’s “pendant.”³³¹ But utopic hope hovers, crucially, in the “region of the not-yet” – it is always looking somewhere just ahead.³³²

If we take the soft twins of ecstasy’s *ekstasis* – from out-stand, or “to stand or be outside of oneself” – to ekphrasis’ out-speak, the similar words standing outside of each other, speaking out, speaking to each other,³³³ we might pull Mitchell’s ekphrastic hope, too, in this direction, by mapping their tripled convergences (and their corresponding parentheticals) as follows:

the past (having-been) to ekphrastic fear (threat to be reduced),

the present (the making-present) to ekphrastic indifference (yet-not same),

and the future (the not-yet) to ekphrastic hope (potential same to be).

Melded with *ekstasis*, ekphrasis stands at the middle of these stacked convergences. Holding the past’s memory, the present’s pulse, and the leaning propulsion toward a “forward-dawning futurity,” it works through the fear of the past and the hope for the future through the ambivalent present object.³³⁴

³²⁴ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 186.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.

³²⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, quoted in Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 10.

³²⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 99.

³²⁹ Mitchell, “Ekphrasis and the Other,” 161.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

³³¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 9.

³³² *Ibid.*

³³³ *Ibid.*, 189.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

We talked, in part one, about ekphrasis' emergence: a linguistic surge through the gut of the grief of the first lack – possibly, in repetition, transforming it. Mimesis turned memory turned different (so something of the past). We talked, in part two, about ekphrasis as a fractal of grief-ankle self-making movement, born of a propulsion through the chasm between the immediate object, the immediate self, and the time between them – turned, through repetition, into a field of self-surrounding (so something of the present). This third part introduces ekphrasis' third dimension: ekphrasis as a “social practice” (or, something of the future).³³⁵

In other words, what we gain by explicitly combining these convergences is this: ekphrastic hope comes into its ultimate teleology: the intimacy of its own direction. Instead of intercepting itself with its own crumpling, as in Mitchell's model, this futural ekphrastic hope becomes the vector of the social, the future, what moves us toward each *other*, curving our horizons such that we are walking not off the cliff of the future but around the round earth, the rounded urn, “the movements that we all are” – to meet.³³⁶

(Of course, as Muñoz writes, hope can be disappointed. In the same way that a speech act – “linguistic articulations that *do* something as well as say something” – “eventually go wrong,” their felicity “always eventually disappointed,” so too do ekphrastic and utopic hope falter.³³⁷ But that eventual disappointment is not a reason to “forsake it as a critical thought process.”³³⁸ Its failure is hope's risk across the intimate us-gap – and its very necessity.)

Ekphrasis stands in the middle of hope/future, fear/past, indifference/present, and in the middle of us. In the “social structure” between you, me, and what we are describing, one of us “stands in a middle position,” Mitchell writes, and the other “(if ekphrastic hope is fulfilled) will be made to ‘see’ the object through the medium of the poet's voice.”³³⁹ The poet *stands* – the addressee *sees* – the point, really, is that there is a meeting point. Even if the poet is not standing, even if the addressee is not seeing, even if both object and image are held in the head, what converges is what is known. What goes from unseen to seen, from not-shared to shared.

We have to turn to the past, writes Muñoz, “for the purpose of arriving at the not yet here.”³⁴⁰ In ekphrasis and in ekstasis, these movements are simultaneous. At this temporal interface, across the same gap that sparked the formation of language (part 1), that propelled the self toward itself (part 2), we stretch across the “interplay of reader and writer in the joint production of meaning,”

³³⁵ Mitchell, “Ekphrasis and the Other,” 165.

³³⁶ Krieger, *Ekphrasis*, 278.

³³⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 9.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*

³³⁹ Mitchell, “Ekphrasis and the Other,” 164.

³⁴⁰ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 30.

stand outside of our horizontal selves, and speak.³⁴¹ I describe the no-longer-conscious, the having-been, toward the hope of the potential-same-to-be: the not-yet-here – of you.

—

(While Mitchell works with ekphrastic poetry, it is worth reiterating that our ekphrastic movement is not restricted to a particular form; rather, like Pollock's performative writing, it is just "what some good writing *does*," "(often felt only in a flash or [...] a 'flicker')," in italics, or, for that matter, a parenthetical. (In a parenthetical, she cites Barthes' "rampant parentheticals, blank ellipses, and almost sculptural formations" (here he is again, puncturing through)).³⁴² "Speech acts are not medium specific," writes Mitchell – we fill the common ground with not only doing-language, but also object, gesture, memory, time.³⁴³ But when I say "We," it is specific – it is you and me. Ekphrasis is a very (inter)personal unit of world building: Describing what is not there for someone else who cannot apprehend it, the image description one part of the construction of our little next world. Pollock of performative writing: "Within its folds, love itself is prewritten."³⁴⁴)

—

In Muñoz' book, the poet Eileen Myles cares for the aging James Schuyler, long after he wrote his poem of ecstasies. Beyond "the void" between the poets, there is "something else" in their care relation: a "surplus" that "exceeds the functionalism of capitalist flows," that "conveys other modes of being,"³⁴⁵ a "rhythm," the "hum of their contact."³⁴⁶ This surplus-between is a starting point.

The family will not be "undone" in language alone, writes Sophie Lewis, but, in order to overcome the dream of non-contingency in our "structures of dependency, need, and provision," in order to begin to dream of a world where "all people are cared for by many by default," we do need to "begin to torque" the language of kinship.³⁴⁷ We still need a better word, one "with more bite," "one whose *ground* is knowledge, practice, and place."³⁴⁸

³⁴¹ Pollock, "Performing Writing," 76.

³⁴² Ibid., 83.

³⁴³ Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," 160.

³⁴⁴ Pollock, "Performing Writing," 94.

³⁴⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 147.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 13.

³⁴⁷ Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 86.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., emphasis mine.

A word, as Sharpe writes, which “might hold you close when the world does not,” which might, in the small spaces between it, “measure the distance between what is and what might be.”³⁴⁹ (Because, as Christina Sharpe writes from abolitionists Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Mariame Kaba, abolition’s “tearing things down and remaking” is also a matter of “remaking our vocabularies.”³⁵⁰)

Maybe all we need, to start, is a word that measures the distance between us. “All of us have been driven from the commons,”³⁵¹ writes Lewis, but we have a common word, a common ground; we can call ourselves tucked in, call the word a bed, a not-place, an undercommons, which is itself a gap “in the sovereign’s space and time,” an “absence, darkness, death, things which are not.”³⁵² It’s the nothing at the centre of us,³⁵³ at the centre of time. The nothing at the centre of duck in the middle of a nothing day. It’s one word glinting in Lewis’ glorious abundant nothing after the family, the university, where “we owe it to each other to falsify the institution, to make politics incorrect, to give the lie to our own determination,” where I get up when you need to rest, where you get up when I do – where “we owe each other the indeterminate, where “we owe each other everything.”³⁵⁴

Maybe we can’t fathom what is “next,” or “after” – Lewis: “I don’t know how to desire it fully”³⁵⁵ – but that is only because we can’t hold it in our own minds. A concrete utopia is the dream of a collective – so we build across the fathomable distance of the interpersonal. Into the fathomable future of someone else, the one or two things we’ve been talking about forever. The making and remaking of a long conversation. Like Muñoz’ queer utopia, Moten and Harney’s undercommons is always elsewhere – but it is also already here, line of the tip of the tongue.³⁵⁶ (Yanyi: “For the reasons that I write, I cannot write alone.”³⁵⁷)

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³⁴⁹ Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, 273.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 262.

³⁵¹ Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 77.

³⁵² Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 15.

³⁵³ Moten and Harney’s philosophy about even their own terms is collaborative with the reader: Moten writes, “What matters is what they do with it; it’s where they take it in their own relations.” (Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 107.)

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁵⁵ Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 88.

³⁵⁶ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 19.

³⁵⁷ Yanyi, *The Year of Blue Water*, 63.

The sculptures of our “parenthetical remarks,”³⁵⁸ our gestures and their “aftermath,”³⁵⁹ our citations, correspondences, and their recipients, are, to Muñoz, both the evidence and archive of our somewhere-beyond.³⁶⁰ The “ephemeral trace” of ekphrasis is the imprint and the record of our undercommons, this drawing we draw back and forth on my floor.³⁶¹ We are writing our genealogies and worlds, our “mode of being in the world that is also inventing the world”: “So,” Muñoz writes, “let us write it down.”³⁶²

(Muñoz often invokes Jacques Derrida’s idea of the trace in this queer accumulation, but only as another faint mark (“Jacques Derrida’s idea of the trace is relevant here,” he writes more than once in his book, without further explanation).³⁶³ But when I pulled at the thread of his footnote, it tugged, of course, again, at the shadow of our chapters’ convergence. To Derrida, the trace is the “other” both inherent to and “forever absent” from the structure of the linguistic sign, an other “of course never to be found in its full being.”³⁶⁴ The very trace, the line, the very echoing voice, the very curve of every melon we have been biting since these chapters’ very beginning.)

The absent presence in Derrida’s “Politics of Friendship” is another kind of relation, another, simple word we might offer as our shared term for Sophie Lewis’ abundant after: a friend. Although friendship’s stakes, to Derrida, are inherently intertwined with death, (“I already hear them speaking on the edge of my tomb”), living in friendship means, crucially, “lov[ing] the future.”³⁶⁵ Loving you means loving what is next, and what is next is you.

Derrida finds a trick to prolonging this loving direction, this “unequalled hope” for an “ecstasy towards a future which will go beyond death”³⁶⁶: “I live in the present speaking of myself in the mouths of my friends.”³⁶⁷ In other words, in the hope for a future that goes beyond death, Derrida finds himself alive in the loving/living present at the turning centre of a mouth. In ekphrasis, the spoken portrait, the audio description of a friend. Not a memory of a painting, not an object turned pile, but someone else – just beyond reach.³⁶⁸

³⁵⁸ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia, 10th Anniversary Edition*. New York University Press, 2019. 71.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁶⁰ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 162.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 121.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁶⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 15.

³⁶⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (Verso, 2005), 29.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁸ The “ekphrastic image as a female other,” “actual or remembered,” is, in Mitchell’s analysis, an “overdetermined feature” in ekphrasis. He also calls it a genre that “tends to describe an object of visual pleasure and fascination from a masculine perspective,” even as he analyzes exclusively ekphrasis written by cis straight white men. Ekphrastic fetishization is not my interest here. I am interested in ekphrasis as a portrait. (Mitchell, “Ekphrasis and the Other,” 168).

In the hope for a future that goes beyond our beds, we find each other in the ekphrasis of a dream. It is a concrete utopian dream, so not a simple “denial or distraction,” but a “communicative and collective mode of transport,”³⁶⁹ a constructed genealogy,³⁷⁰ an ekphrastic hope –

one that can be disappointed. In Muñoz’ dream, his friend is still alive, and “It is my job to get him out, to save him. I never do. I always fail.”³⁷¹ Still, embedded within ekphrastic failure is its hopeful possibility: the “transformation of the dead, passive image into a living creature.”³⁷² Or: the living creature, the beloved someone, transformed.

In Yanyi’s dream, we “eat from / the fruit of our lives together.”³⁷³ In Leah Piepzna-Samarsinha’s dream, there was “another altar spread out back of your apartment.”³⁷⁴ In Eli Tareq El Bechelany-Lynch’s dream, (in a book that is itself a collection of letters to “friends, lovers, and in-betweens”), they are able to get out of bed: “a poem might will it into existence.”³⁷⁵

(In Christina Sharpe’s dream, all she could remember were the sticky buns with currants: “the buns were made by Amish women and every Saturday morning my mother would drive to the farmers’ market in Wayne in order to buy some.”³⁷⁶)

In my dream, you, Vi-An and I are in my twin bed together. We are eating blueberry pie the periwinkle of my bedsheets, of Sharpe’s book cover; the crust thick oat. In my dream, my dream sheets are pink. I mean to take a photo, but we keep eating it all, a density at the top of our stomachs. You stand facing the light and ask me how I take such good care of my leaves. We laugh because you are the one who knows about plants.

—

In its “organized simultaneity,” ekphrasis’ ecstatic temporal unity, the grieving joint of past, present, future; fear, hope, indifference; birth, life, death, the objects in a row, the tarot cards in a line, “arrests time in the very act of celebrating it.”³⁷⁷ Tight fist at the centre of holding – it stalls time, it stalls – a swirl at the bottom, pinching what we destroyed and survived, what we swallowed and lost, what we became as it became us, what we tended towards, what we tend to,

³⁶⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 145.

³⁷⁰ “There is only one genealogy,” writes Jill Johnston (whose Village Voice column about dance, as ekphrasis often goes, “progressed into a column about everything”). “It takes place in our dreams.” (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 121).

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

³⁷² Mitchell, “Ekphrasis and the Other,” 167.

³⁷³ Yanyi, *The Year of Blue Water*, 20.

³⁷⁴ Piepzna-Samarasinha, *The Future is Disabled*, 277.

³⁷⁵ Eli Tareq El Bechelany-Lynch, *Knot Body* (Metatron Press, 2020), 66.

³⁷⁶ Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, 113.

³⁷⁷ Krieger, *Ekphrasis*, 284.

what means something to me only because it means something to us – it holds the trace, the semiotic, the truth of distance in parentheses, tight, it looks up, looks the loved one in the eye –

(until the bend of the parentheses snaps).

Because the beloved, like Sharpe's mother, bow blurred on the edge of a table, is already "always in motion."³⁷⁸ Kathy's fingers, to gesture mimesis' swell, spread in front of her cheeks like frills. Chew-Bose's grandmother's hands, "as with nearly all elegant things, [...] photograph eerie. The way a rose stem looks arthritic."³⁷⁹ The rose stems behind Agnes Martin's back, the shapes in the air left to hum in the retelling.³⁸⁰

In other words, Barthes' desire "to outline the loved face by thought," "to enlarge this face in order to see it better, to understand it better, to know its truth,"³⁸¹ Chew-Bose's, Duras', Kleege's, the child's desire to know their melting mother's reds, like our desire, flipping Derrida, for our friends to live in the present speaking of our mouths, is ekphrasis' same desire. To still a moving scene, to move a stilled scene, to have control over its movement "in order to have time to know at last."³⁸² In order to have time.

—

A meeting place at the centre of loved faces, ekphrasis holds between, *extending* what would otherwise disappear. By holding the having-been, the making-present, it extends the not-yet where we meet. It is that bed, that dream, that other place we – no matter how distant, how separated by location or time – can reach. The to-somewhere where nothing is, where what we owe to each other is everything. Where "you are always already in the thing that you call for and that calls you," and you call, and we are already in the bed where we are.³⁸³ Where we fill the gap where language first sprouted, where the flesh is molten and formed, where, against the chasm of future, we are a fathomable distance away. We build between us our everyday record, each word of the utopic because it is of the quotidian. The words of a portrait, a sculpture with a purpose. We speak forward; we face each other; we see the words tremble, tremble – we watch them arrive.

—

³⁷⁸ Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, 202.

³⁷⁹ Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood*, 79.

³⁸⁰ Yanyi writes of Agnes Martin's painting, *Greystone*: "The painting is a memory turned again and against itself. The painting is that paint-ing. Who knows what the stone was to Agnes, what she learned by giving herself to it repeatedly. They took nothing away from each other." (Yanyi, *The Year of Blue Water*, 56)

³⁸¹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 100.

³⁸² *Ibid.*

³⁸³ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 14.

Sharpe, “in the midst of [...] all that is being made and unmade by masses of Black, young, queer, trans, and disabled people organizing and gathering in order to insist a habitable wor(l)d into being,” finds herself rereading Canisia Lubrin’s “Dream #5,” a poem building with the “force of our collective imagining,” this “old/new word/world that was always there and ... is ‘big enough for all of us.’”³⁸⁴ In its final line, “some suspension breaks, some clarity returns.”³⁸⁵ Not just a break, but a cycle: Sharpe’s breath, that “first and final movement,”³⁸⁶ “taken away” by the poem, (“their hands—.”³⁸⁷), then given back.³⁸⁸ “How clouds hold and release.”³⁸⁹ “Dream and return.”³⁹⁰

(She had that same dream for years, until she brought those buns to her mother’s grave. “Some notes arrive from the grave. Some sweets appease the living.”³⁹¹)

—

In parentheses, wet footprints, the unmade bed, each sheet imprinted with the soft press of the writing above it, the trace of the trace leaves a taste in the mouth. (“A haunting flavour. It used to taste like.”³⁹²) A description of a lake at sunset leaves Kleege with the taste of blue popsicle, meeting, melting, in the middle.³⁹³ Chew-Bose’s memory lifts sunny dust from the throat. Her references flip; the leaf has a hole. It widens to open. In Vi-An’s dream, the objects were specific and did not exist. We touched the things; it changed their shape. When you know I am bed, white wall, white sky, you say you will put me in your mouth. The red marble curls. The weight on our feet. When you leave, the after-image holds its future possibility: I remember you. You will come back.

³⁸⁴ Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, 274.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁶ Browne, Kevin Adonis. Quoted in Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, 219.

³⁸⁷ Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, 192.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 274.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 263.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 272.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 263.

³⁹³ Kleege, *More than Meets the Eye*, 83.

A Note for Palestine

The translation/ transmutation of the visual to the linguistic is never a neutral process – there always exists, however minor or momentary, an imbalance of power between the one who describes and the one who receives. But the fall and winter of 2023, during which much of these chapters was written, starkly clarified that rift: What is systematically shown and not shown, which people are granted safety for which expression, has split glaringly along the lines of institutionally sanctioned power.

While young Palestinians shared endless days of destruction and intimate devastation on social media, speaking mostly in English for a Western audience, the passive voice insistently punctured the headlines of news outlets like The New York Times, and our elected officials, directly aiding and abetting this ongoing atrocity, could not even say the word ceasefire.

If I am citing Palestinian scholar Edward Said, if I am even mentioning work shown at the AGO, whose first Indigenous curator, Wanda Nanibush, was forced to leave her position due to her outspoken support of the Palestinian cause, if I am writing about queer and trans futurities when those very possibilities are being weaponized to justify genocide, if I am citing abolitionists as police militarization across Turtle Island ongoingly intensifies, none of this movement of ekphrasis means anything unless the action that it is is also one of solidarity. And if, as aja monet writes in the introduction to Mohamed El-Kurd's *Rifqa*, solidarity is a “series of choices we make with one another,” then let us continue to make that choice.³⁹⁴

³⁹⁴ monet, aja, in El-Kurd, Mohammed. *Rifqa*. Haymarket Books, 2021. x.

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Appendix A: Accompanying Digital Materials

1. Grief Ankle: Support Paper
 - a. This document describes the interrelation between the written thesis and the thesis performance.
 - b. Date: March 14, 2024
 - c. File Name: Kneifel.EJ_SupportPaper