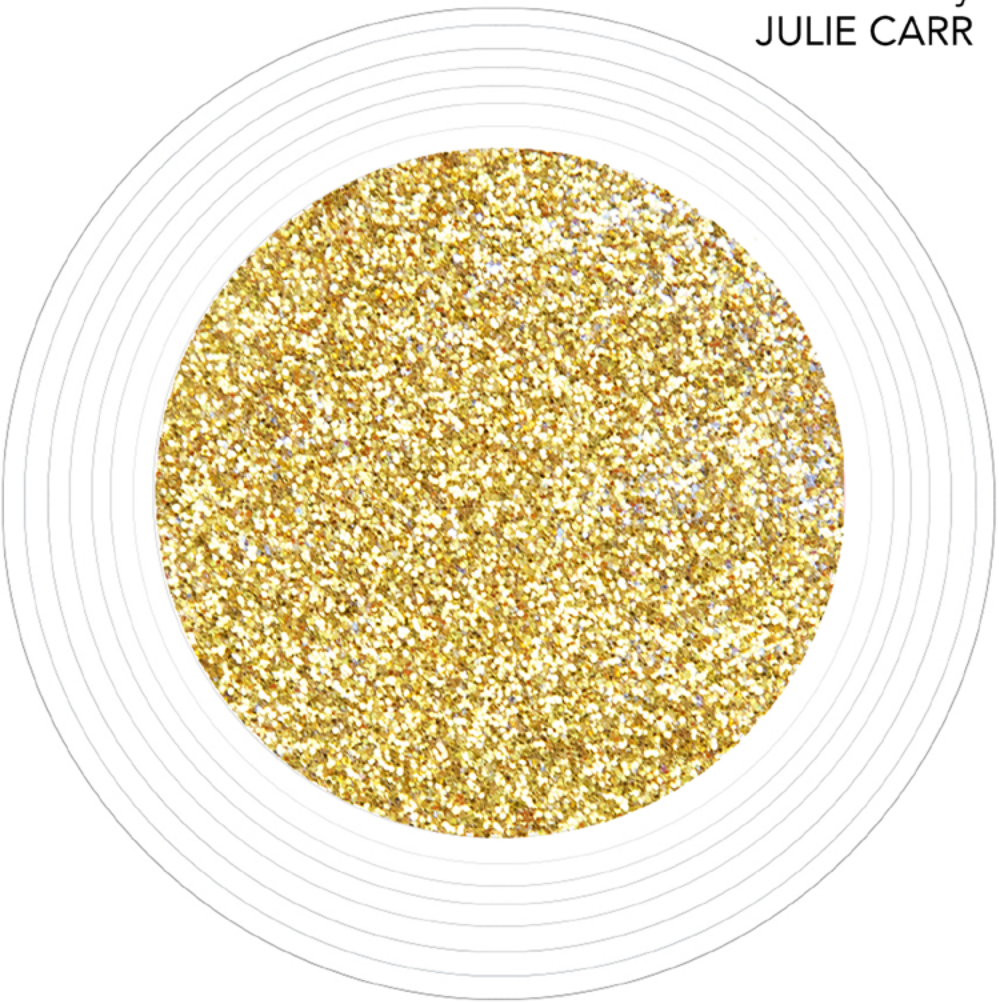
The Silence that Fills the Future

by
JULIE CARR



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ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES

#19

ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES

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INTRODUCTION

—Julie Carr

The pieces collected here are culled from four future books, or what I think of as books, though they might not be. For years I only worked on one or two projects at a time. I could not understand people who flipped back and forth between files on their computers like birds feeding various nests at once. But as the future looks shorter to me now than it did then, I began, for better or worse, to cram more into the days or into the computer, and so there are these titles: *Objects from a Borrowed Confession* (whose title is itself borrowed and might need to be given back); *Someone Shot My Book: Poetry, Emotion, Feminism*; *Think Tank* (which really is a book, due out in April from Solid Objects); and *Real Life: An Installation.* Somehow all four of these entities co-exist and grow together, though they are at different stages of expansion or contraction. For this chapbook, Andy Fitch and I decided to represent each one of these future books, or dream events, or landscapes, or recording sessions, or fantasy vacations, or destroyed works, or small businesses, or emotion maps, or warm mirrors, or phantom cities, or provisional assertions, or architectural models, or cheap motels or late night bus rides. As I selected what to include, it became more apparent that the overlapping time of writing has meant shared themes or patterns of thinking, as well as repeated references to certain writers who have not in recent years ever been re-shelved. But maybe what these writings share more than any particular obsession is that they each represent some effort to push myself past whatever it is I think I already know or do. "The War Reporter: On Confession" came about because I fell in love with Martha Gellhorn's letters and with T. J. Clark's *In Sight of Death* at the same time, and had to think hard about what these two radically different confessional books had to do with one another and what they meant to me at a certain time. In "By Beauty and by Fear: On Narrative Time" I attempt to understand a terror that kept me from sleeping well for a long time, and what that terror has to do with poetry and my need to write and read it. "Spirit Ditties of No Tone," which is about (but not part of) the book titled *Think Tank,* records an effort I made to turn writing into a form of listening and listening into a form of open pleasure—open because directed at no particular source or outcome. Finally I've included a selection of 14-line poems from the project called *Real Life: An Installation*, which I've been working

on every day since Labor Day 2011. These are, perhaps, distilled versions of the essays that precede them.

This chapbook's title comes from Susan Stewart's *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses.*

The War Reporter: On Confession

I started to write memoirs, addressing them to you, since I am always talking to you…if there are any rests left, on paper, of my life, they will have to be like this, disjointed and uncertain, done for no reason, and put in an envelope to mail.

—Martha Gellhorn, 1941

(*Letters* 117)

1.

What is it that I'm turning toward in turning toward you?

This is a question for philosophers.

"When I love you, what do I love?" asks St. Augustine to his God, his silent confessor.

Or, more recently:

> May I say that you test me, that you yoke me to the trail of writing this confession in your silence so as to be assured that, wavering on the thread run out between yourself and myself, I do not fall back into the arrogance of being me without you, in my nothingness? (Lyotard)

Confessing, does one ask to be forgiven, or rather to be recognized, even, one could say, made substantive?—confessing not so much a sin, but a desire?

*

Two confessional modes I'll travel between: the diary entry and the letter. T. J. Clark's *The Sight of Death,* comprised almost entirely of diary entries composed in the sight of two paintings by Poussin over a period of six months, opens by appealing to the reader. The first appeal from the preface is for patience, sympathy: "Perhaps I should register at least an awareness that this study of two pictures by Poussin seems to sit somewhat oddly with the other main piece of writing I have been involved with over the past two years…. Some readers, I suspect, will not understand, and maybe not sympathize." The initial undated diary entry, which functions as an introduction, holds a bolder confession, this time of depression or, should we say simply, bad mood: "I was in low spirits—irritated at my own irritation…I kept thinking of William Morris' great tirade against Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee, and felt ashamed of my own incapacity for anger. I badly needed something better to think about." In this way the book claims intimacy with its reader, its "you." And in this way too the book acknowledges that what its writer most needs as he launches into this confessional project is some access to liveliness, some way to reawaken—through the act of looking and of writing to

us, to re-establish, or perhaps establish in a new way, a kind of presence.

Martha Gellhorn's letters, by nature of their form, are in almost all moments intimate, often reaching toward their various readers with intense loneliness. They confess to many things: to self-loathing, to impatience, to love, to doubts of all kinds. But mostly they confess to the desire to be alive—to liveliness in spite of, in the face of, in sight of, death.

*

"I do think you would wish very much to have seen, the other afternoon, the tiny little silver balloons like elephants floating against a pink red sky over the city that is now so shabby and still quite lovely. I think you would have liked the black Lancs going off into the black night. I think you would like the cold long train rides, listening to the people talk. I think it is not disgusting to look at the world and at the war; because someone must see, and after all we have trained ourselves to see."

Gellhorn is trying to convince Ernest Hemingway to join her in London two years after the Blitz and six months before D-Day. "I think it is not disgusting to look at the world and at the war," she says, presumably because he's indicated some disgust (after all, she is a woman and his wife), or perhaps because, though the war is disgusting, the act of looking is a way to live, a way to, if not defy, then at least accompany the disgust that is war. We know that she would soon leave "E," as she called him, later referring to their marriage as a kind of torture; this letter is one of many that exhibits the desperate longing one can feel for someone one is about to abandon. But what's important here is not her confessed desire for him (which seems forced anyway), but her desire to include him, or anyone, in the things she sees: the balloon, the pink sky, the black night, the black Lancs. In letter after letter she details her ongoing effort, through the act of *seeing* and saying what she sees, to become *a part* ("I would give anything on earth to be part of the invasion and see Paris right at the beginning"), as if only attention, first-hand witnessing, will keep her alive ("I see perfection as a complete aliveness; being alert and eager"). Or as if only by confessing to another will she, in being recognized by that other, be substantiated.

*

But is there, in seeing and describing what one sees, in attempting to "tell the truth"—to say what *is*—an ethics? This is what Clark argues (and the young Gellhorn too, though later she gives up on it). Serving as eyes for others is more than a professional duty; it is, to borrow Clark's other term for it, "a politics."

"We are in a war," writes Clark, a war of "representations and actions…and part of the struggle at present is simply to save the possibility of truth—of complexity and humanity—in either sphere, and in the spheres' constant overlapping."

This "possibility of truth"—it's what close looking, or close reading, and the careful descriptions they give rise to, hope to approach. It's what confession hopes to achieve. Against this, we have the constant "regime of visual flow, displacement, disembodiment, endless available revisability of the image, endless…multi-dimensionality and sewing together of everything in nets and webs," what Clark calls a "pseudo-utopia present[ing] itself as the very form of self-knowledge." Such lies, argues Clark, are devastating because, like a changeling staring up from the cradle, they've replaced the human.

Battling, then, on the side of truth and humanity, and the only weapons, eyes with which to see, a voice with which to describe, the art writer turns soldier: "My art history has always been reactive. Its enemies have been the various ways in which visual imagining of the world has been robbed of its true humanity, and conceived of as something less than human, nonhuman, brilliantly (or dully) mechanical."

The young Gellhorn also saw "the act of keeping the record straight" as a necessary good, as, in a sense, salvational: "I wrote very fast, as I had to; I was always afraid that I would forget the exact sound, smell, words, gestures which were special to this moment and this place….The point of these articles is that they were true."

Gellhorn too was fighting on the side of the human: "I waste time and energy, and lavish my heartaches all over the place: but I still know what I'm doing. I believe in man. I want to be with those who work to give him a chance."

And like Clark, her only weapon is description, telling what she sees, attention to the details of what is, because "*what happens* to human beings, before, during and afterward [war], is all that matters" [emphasis added].

2.

But however compelling this political humanist project is (and it is), the ethics of seeing, of really seeing, and describing what one sees, this effort to tell some kind of truth, which is one way to define confessional writing, meets an opposing force: not just the lies that others tell, but the fact that the very thing that most wants to be told remains outside of language.

To quote Amiri Baraka, on the day after his death:

> I seen something / I SEEN something / And you seen it too / You just can't call its name.

To see into something that can't be seen, to name something that has no name, to speak to someone who cannot respond (to, in Lyotard's terms, "bear witness" to "unpresentability")—this seems to me to be the other work of confession, the work that can never be finished, that keeps confession alive. Perhaps all the

effort thrown into the act of seeing, of being alert to the present in whatever way one can ("a complete aliveness, being alert and eager"), might be less a way to "serve truth" than an attempt to seize or stabilize temporal momentum and all it carries with it: memory, love, the self.

"At thy bidding the moments fly by. Grant me in them, an interval" (Augustine).

Seeing and describing in both Gellhorn and Clark are at all times charged with loss, with proximity to death, with grief. But this seems so often to be the case with confession: a death, or death in general, sits beside or within the urge to confess. As Derrida acknowledges: "Augustine writes *Confessions* after his mother's death. Lyotard publishes posthumously his *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, I wrote 'Circumfession' while my mother was alive but not able to identify me, to recognize me, to name me, to call me" (Caputo). And there are others: Emerson's "Experience" in which he confesses to his distance from the death of his son ("I cannot get it nearer me"); Barthes's *Mourning Diary*, written on the death of his mother: "Less and less to write, to say, except this (which I can tell no one)." Alice Notley's *In The Pines:* "Is that him dead, or is that me?"; "I was the witness / I was his dead eyes." Perhaps what must be confessed to, with death so nearby, listening in, is simply the fact of living, of life itself.

*

I wouldn't be writing this if I didn't also have something to confess. And what I confess to here is also nothing more or less than my aliveness. Why would I need to confess this: I am alive? Because I'm a child who outlives her mother.

"We are all (at some time or another) observing a death watch over our mother," writes Derrida. And then later in the same essay: "I always say I'm confessing my mother."

*

And it's not just that I confess to being alive while another dies, guilty or ashamed in my body not for anything I've done, but simply for being (Levinas: "what appears in shame is precisely the fact of being riveted to oneself").

What I'll confess to "in the sight of death" is also always the longing to be "a part" not of what is, but of what isn't.

Confessing in sight of death to a desire for some way to cross the uncrossable barrier between "us" and "them"—all the dead that stare up without seeing from the mass grave that is the earth—or more precisely in my case "me" and "her." This is where confession becomes a kind of theology. As Gerald Bruns says in his essay on Lyotard's *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (an impossible little book that itself stands on the border between the living and the dead, written on the eve of Lyotard's death), "There is no separating theology from desire….The God whom we experience is exactly the one who withholds himself from appearance and apprehension…leaving us to experience the absolute abjection of longing for what is untouchable,

unnamable, unimaginable, unknowable, unthinkable, and deathly silent."

*

Just before admitting that all the while as he's been gazing directly on his second and most important painting, *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*, he's been glancing sideways at a more intimate loss—the death of his mother—just before he admits that in fact it is *her* corpse that has had his attention all along, Clark's confidence begins to falter:

> I feel resistance setting in at this point—my mind telling me I've gone far enough—but I shall blunder on, against all decency. I wonder if the ultimate horror surrounding the dead body… has to do with our sensing that all the identities and faces we are obliged to give the corpse… are no more than reaction-formations. They try to shield us from the great fact, the ultimate uncanny: that Death, in the corpse, disappoints us—looks away from us, and no longer has a face of any kind.

"I've seen something / You've seen it too / You just can't call its name" (Baraka).

Confession, like all writing, "is always a matter of skirting around a black hole, the impenetrable, the centrally mysterious" (Clark).

*

The "absolute abjection of longing" has no object and a false name, the name "God" for example, or the name "mother," the name "father." When I love you, what do I love? You try to name it; you can't name it.

"My patron said, 'name it'; // I said, I can not name it, there is no name" (H. D.).

*

Last spring, before anything was really blooming, I found myself in Washington, D.C. with a day alone. Largely because of Lyotard's essay "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," but also just because of the paintings themselves, I went to see Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross*. Lyotard discusses these paintings as instances of the sublime "now," as an attempt to render in paint the rupture in time we could call "presence," a "now-ness" that "is a stranger to consciousness and cannot be constituted by it," a "now-ness" that can only be felt in the flesh.

The paintings were housed in a little room in the basement of the Modern Wing of the National Gallery. The room had a yellowish, dank, under-lit feel. Worse, it was watched over by a guard afflicted with logomania—speaking incessantly into the wall before him, confessing, maybe, to nothing or everything. I tried, almost comically, to experience something at all, but my expectations had been too huge and the room too small. And so I went upstairs. I wandered around without purpose until finding myself in the rooms with the Impressionists. These paintings, achingly familiar

from all kinds of commodities that have plastered them onto our eyes, were nothing to me. Until, it seemed, I suddenly looked up. And there was a color: a deep blue from my childhood: *Girl with Watering Can*, pinned to my wall for many years, until faded and curling at its edges. And then I knew I had been in this room before, 40 years before as a three-year-old girl. My mother, having just separated from my father, had brought my brother and me for some weeks of recovery or reassessment (who knows?) to her parents' house in the city. Maybe she gave me the print that very day we saw the painting there, or maybe she bought it much later, remembering that I'd loved it. I thought the little girl on the path was myself. Or rather, I thought she was my daughter, my future daughter that I was bound to protect. And of course, standing there that day last spring, I started to cry, an odd kind of crying—a sudden burst that was as suddenly swallowed up by the quiet gallery and the silvery walls.

I went down to the gift shop and shamelessly purchased a card, sticking it into the book on revolution that I'd been reading that week. A bookmark it remains.

*

One sees and in seeing, deeply attending, one feels one's "place in history" (again Gellhorn), or to put it more generally, one feels one's place in time—separate from any origin, approaching some unknowable end, distinct from one's beloveds because one's beloveds are always distinct. Experiencing my place means I am here, which is to say, not there, not her, no longer her.

*

Confession as a mode of "harassing life in order to keep it alive" (Caputo).

*

There is in Lyotard's response to Newman a kind of *rapture*: "a painting by Newman is an angel." The painting performs an annunciation, but what it announces is only presence itself. The verb "to be" becomes its own utopic utterance. I have little to say

about my little Renoir, but more to say about the way presence breaks in on you. You can't go looking for it, even less go shopping for it. In fact, you're in the way of it. "The course of real life, biography, gives lasting resistance to the improbable event of your coming," writes Lyotard or Augustine—it's impossible to tell. But then you find yourself standing, emerging out of shadows, arms by your sides, with whatever object you are holding, in her sight.

As Bruns writes, though consciousness cannot fully grasp the break in time we might call "nowness," the body knows only that pause: "The flesh belongs to the temporality of the meanwhile in which time does not pass but pauses." Or, more dramatically, "Flesh experiences time as a singular event—something outside the routine of coming and going: an event which is not a link in a chain but a break, an interruption, an accident, a swerve, fall." No wonder the war reporter wants to be there on the front lines. No wonder the art historian keeps returning to his seat in the museum. To look and look and wait to be seen.

By Beauty and by Fear: On Narrative Time

1. Fear

"A window," says Cole Swensen, "is a mode of travel, distilling the senses in a glass vial, flying sleeves." But here, gray rectangles of gray dawn—nothing more, nothing moves. I'm still in the bed, having slept hardly at all. A homemade dollhouse mocks me with its cardboard beds and paper rugs. A plaster wedding cake on the floor, a jumble of heels and skirts.

Back in the library sits a cart of photography books, each more gruesome than the last. I told the librarians I was researching violence, and am embarrassed by how seriously they took me. In fact, I am researching my own fears, despite the moratorium against considering the self that has not yet been lifted. ("The effacement of the self, a virtue or a sham?") But every person is born into a situation, and the situation into which I was born (and I take no pride in this and yet, maybe incongruously, feel some shame) was one of fear. I had nothing obvious, nothing bodily, to fear. Nonetheless,

most of my earliest memories, and many of those that follow, are memories of fear.

The vines at the window, the threads that unraveled from my blanket, the cats I lived with, the fireplace, and the dark wood of the living room floor. The cupboards and the backs of drawers, my brother's hands and my mother's mouth. For no good reason.

~

That year, for many months of it, I could not sleep.

"What is it to be a *who* or a *me*, or even more radically, a *no one*: without identity, that is, no longer able to say 'I'?" asks Gerald Bruns in *On Ceasing to be Human*. To embellish, he turns to Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Fall of Sleep*: "I sleep and this *I* that sleeps can no more say that it sleeps than it could say that it is dead" (Bruns). Sleep—the house of the unnarratable "I."

Bruns has also written on Wordsworth's fear, announced in the line from *The Prelude* I've borrowed for the title of this essay. And for Bruns, the fear Wordsworth explores throughout *Lyrical Ballads* and also in *The Prelude*, is less the fear of not being an "I" than the fear of becoming an other: "the fear that intimacy with another mind carries with it [is] a risk of transformation into the strange, the monstrous, the more-or-less-than or other-than, human." To encounter the monstrous in a book, in the street, or in your mother is to experience the terror that one might *be*, in fact, this one who murders, this one who raves.

I could not sleep because of fear, because the year I spent reading websites and staring at photography books that featured some of the most monstrous things humans do to others was also the year my mother shat in the furnace room when she could not find the bathroom, the year she wandered the house sobbing the word "miserable, miserable" to herself or to us. The year I lost her to miserable was the same year I spent in the archives of violence, as if one set of fears might outshine another. Of course I feared losing her to misery. But of course I also feared losing myself, to her misery or to my own. Maybe not sleeping became a way to protect, with avid intensity, the fiction of the

coherent and narratable self, this temporary invention of the day.

> Calm succumbs to the hour…An embedded immensity fills you…There is no self just this falling off. (Rankine)

Claudia Rankine is speaking into her video *Airplane*. John Lucas's camera has filmed the soft faces of people asleep on planes, sky drifting past: "discarding / its ceremony of consciousness… drifting into nothing." Rankine calls sleep "the inevitable move inward," but inward toward what, if, in sleeping, I "lose myself"? "Isn't this confidence? / Isn't this the completed life?" she asks as they float.

~

At 15 in an airport alone I picked up a payphone to call my friend Kate. She answered from a room in which she and her parents and brother had just learned that her other brother, the other twin, had been killed. A room: from Latin "rus," or "open land." I hung up the phone

and redirected myself into that room where un-poured Coke and Sprite sat gleaming in candlelight. Kate's mother with her hand at her mouth. Everyone looking at nothing but the floor. The floor, that open open.

And now, decades later, another friend from that time—she's the one staring at nothing. An SUV jumped the curb where she was walking with her two sons. The older one, ten, a slight boy with dimples in his grin, was struck and killed. In another airport, some dim hallway, I stand trying to breathe, my forehead against a carpeted wall. TSA workers kindly pass me by.

> "We are all (at some time or another) observing a deathwatch over our mother," wrote Derrida.
>
> All at some time observing a deathwatch over our kids.

~

It's been said that poetry can reverse the movement of time—for when you get to the end of the line, you have to go back to the beginning again. "Our eyes darting from the end of one line to the beginning of another create a kind of instability in linear time," says Chris Nealon paraphrasing J. H. Prynne. It's also been said that poetry ruptures time—makes a hole in the movement of time we call "day" or "hour." This happens when language is so thick and complex that to read is to get caught in traps and ruts. All those "little knots of impacted, concentrated, dense language: paradoxes, ambiguities, and indeterminacies; self-reference and repetition," writes Cathy Gallagher, "seem to cross back and forth over [themselves] and consequently to thwart forward movement." Complexity and recurrence—more than literary devices—ways to refuse directed velocity.

The French poet Nicolas Pesquès tells us he stopped going to the movies in 1984 ("Don't tell me no tales"), that he never reads a novel, that his work is not a "project," for he never knows when it will end, if it will begin again. A poem, then, is an anti-narrative, which might be a good reason to fear it, or, if narratives lead only to horror or loss, might be a good reason to court it:

and so an instant can really get intense
through forceful concentration
forcefully knotted

And its emotion is only rooted
in the certainty of accident

~

A swell of laughter from across the room: the conspiratorial laughter of colleagues. My mother, counting all her losses, the foremost among them linear time, said that what she most longed for was a "colleague." It was hard for her to remember this word, but it was an important word, I realize now, because a colleague is that person who shares in your process of narrating the self. A colleague assists you in making a fiction, a fictional self. A family member's intimacy reveals the failures of that fiction. A family member knows too much about accident and error, and anyway, intrudes. Perhaps this is why telling your life story to people on buses and planes, your passing, temporary colleagues, is such a drug.

2. Name

"How's the baby?" I ask. "Doing good, doing good. But he's doing that day/night reversal thing." Because the wind is blowing, we keep the conversation short. The baby's wrapped up but for his tiny face, his shut tight eyes. Clouds amassing in the west, turning the blue sky dark. Babies are good, but they stay up all night. The wind is blowing. They haven't yet given him a name.

Why must the Queen in the fairytale, trying to keep her baby, guess the little man's name? A name out of nowhere, an untraceable, unlocatable, unrootable nonsense name could never *be* guessed. It would be like trying to see a color that does not exist. Though the story says, "He took pity on her," on her maternal terror, it's obvious that by asking her to guess his impossible name he is showing her exactly no pity. But the Queen is no innocent either, for Kingly greed has infected her. Once, she was "humble, meek, and grateful," now, despite her promises, she's greedy for her child. And

her greed directs her to cheat, to use her power, her servants, to find out the little man's name. She wins in the end, which means the baby wins his permanent home and eventual kingdom (for don't forget, this baby is the heir). But this winning is a result of deception, which is perhaps a fact of all kingdoms—won through lies, by way of lying, just as pity is a lie. A pretty pitiless tale.

The little man never thought for a moment that she'd guess his name (and he was right about that). He exposed himself, however, by the fire. Confessions—burned out of us as dance and song.

And yet, the name is not just a riddle that once solved will land the Queen safely in the country of mothers; it's also a curse, for once spoken it destroys the little man. He flies off through the window on a spoon and is "never heard from again," or, in the darker versions, he's so enraged he stamps a hole in the earth and is sucked down into it. Unbirthed: taken back into the body. The little man—the baby's doppelganger—is the unnamed, the unnamed one who must be destroyed in order to complete the narrative, in order to reinforce (patriarchal) order, which relies on names.

So what happens when my friends finally name the baby boy? Is something lost at that moment, even when all is gained? Does the baby, in taking on a name, become, in some other way, swallowed?

Blake:

> "I have no name;
> I am but two days old."
> What shall I call thee?
>
> "I happy am,
> Joy is my name."
> Sweet joy befall thee!

The verb "befall" suggests a crisis in the act of naming. The word dates back to Old English (897), and seems to have meant simply "to fall" until the twelfth century where it begins to also mean "to inherit"—certainly one of Blake's meanings here. But as I search the OED I find that almost all instances of "befall," where it takes an indirect object ("thee"), indicate an inheritance that is bad or dangerous, that will leave its object worse off, not better.

"I do not know what it gives," wrote H. D. of the "jewel" vibrating at the center of her "Tribute to the Angels," "a vibration that we can not name, // for there is no name for it; / my patron said, 'name it'; // I said, I can not name it, there is no name." Patrons, kings, queens: those in power need things named. Poets, though they trade in words (or because they do), recognize the unnamable core that burns. Before named, the infant of Blake's poem is disordered happiness. Language can't even organize itself correctly around her (I happy am). But once named, once "called," the infant suffers a fall, one could say, into narrative.

~

Cloud mounds. Heaps. Masses. And the little lifted screens click and hum. One could turn things off, but not the sky. One could read the entire newspaper start to finish. Start to finish. Mouth to foot. So I said to my head, go on. One could visit the green edges of the mind in cafes where one talks to oneself through the keys. There, on a rickety chair, a woman sat picking at

her food and told me a story. The last thing she said was, "He finished the job"—as if we were in a movie.

A man was sleeping on her mother-in-law's couch. Her mother-in-law was helping him out because he was having some troubles. They were both in Houston for a time, "finishing a job" in order to earn their pensions. The mother-in-law hadn't told anyone about the guy on her couch, and, it seems, hadn't been aware that he was using crack. He was just a co-worker, a friend, and he too had left his family behind to follow this job—his wife and five kids. Something about this story feels incomplete. Everything about this confession is borrowed. He killed her, says the woman across from me, with a kitchen knife. He stabbed her over nine times. Finished the job.

The son, my friend's husband, makes plans to visit a firing range in order to learn how to shoot. This is perhaps a reasonable response. Perhaps not.

That night, I can't sleep. My head hurts and I'm awake at three. In the glow of the lamplight, I read two stories.

The first is narrated by a ghost. The ghost watches while a wealthy eccentric old man has sex with his (the ghost's) dead body. Because the ghost is beyond caring about his body, he empathizes with the old man's suffering and befriends him, listens to him through the night as the old man confesses to, and attempts to explain, his depravity.

In the second story, a drugged-out teenaged boy witnesses the slow death of his older brother. The older brother, dying of cancer, is nonetheless cruel and violent. And when he can no longer behave violently, he does so by proxy—has a friend hurl a padlock at his younger brother's face. What do these stories have in common? What do they share with the story told in the café? Depraved, sick, lonely and lost boys and men. The standard situation for narratives.

> "Let me in," say the women, picking at their food.

For even more frightening than a narrative that features depravity is having no narrative at all.

~

They named him Owen. Once he is named he begins to have a face. Once he has a face, he will begin to make sounds other than instinctual. He will begin with vowels, and they will rise, as Plath said, like balloons.

~

Not sleeping might be an illness, or it might be a symptom. A producer or product of fear. The unnamed little man at the fire will take your child. Only the vigilance of insomnia will allow you to hunt down his name, will keep your kid safe, and keep you too in the story. But after a number of weeks of not really sleeping, I begin to fear, not just the nights, but the days too.

3. Beauty

Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up
Fostered alike by beauty and by fear
(Wordsworth)

The beautiful and the fearful (or the sublime, as the mother of fear) are the two dominant aesthetic categories during Wordsworth's time. One might say his effort throughout *The Prelude* is to work out their relation. Fear, he suggests, turns its ear outward, listening for external threat:

I heard among the solitary hills
Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
Of undistinguishable motion, steps
Almost as silent as the turf they trod.
…
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
Blow through my ear! the sky seemed not a sky
Of earth—and with what motion moved the clouds!

But beauty, it seems, when not referring to some transitory attribute of a girl, lad or sky, wells up from within, is the mind's answer to sublime terror, the mind's imaginative ability to reorganize, or "harmonize"—to make coherent sense out of what it fears:

Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows
Like harmony in music; there is a dark
Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles
Discordant elements, makes them cling together
In one society.

Elsewhere Wordsworth calls beauty an "ennobling Harmony." But more famous and more bold is Wordsworth's triumph at the very end of Book XIV where, having confronted the "fixed, abysmal, gloomy, breathing-place"—the earth, which he earlier refers to as "an enemy"—he now declares the mind of man "A thousand times more beautiful than the earth / On which he dwells." The mind, "in beauty exalted," imbued with imagination ("spiritual love"), spells the end of fear: "For there fear ends."

But what if pulling beauty apart from sublime terror is not an option? What if beauty cannot tame fear, for the feared thing and the beautiful thing are one?

An older allegory serves me better: Hephaestus, the ugly forger of technologies, was in a rage against his beautiful wife's promiscuity. The net he wove of gossamer thin wire was meant to capture Aphrodite in the act of betraying him. But when he trapped her and her lover, the irascible and violent Ares, the other Gods gathered around and only laughed and laughed.

That gossamer net forged with precision is one way to understand narrative. And beauty, which rises out of foam, defies the traps narrative sets for it. Beauty has, as the story tells us, more affinity with violence than with the "inscrutable workmanship" of craft. According to Homer, the entrapment only leads Aphrodite to divorce Hephaestus, for in the *Iliad* she "consorts freely with Ares." And so beauty slips out of the grip of craft and into the arms of brutality.

Some lines from Anne Carson's *The Beauty of the Husband*, another tale of promiscuous beauty, apply:

> Existence *depends on beauty.*
> In the end.

> Existence *will not stop*
> Until it gets to beauty.

Carson, steeped in the ancients, shows us that beauty is necessary and provokes unrestrained pursuit; it "does not rest," and so neither do we. In *The Beauty of the Husband* she draws on the Persephone myth: pitting seduction, represented by Hades, against production, the realm of Demeter. This might be akin to pitting beauty, or the anarchic beauty of poetry, against narrative. Poetry, in that case, is in "sympathy with darkness, with aimless passion, with lawless violence, with everything in the world that seems to perpetuate the refusal to come into the world"—in sympathy, that is, with the un-nameable magician dancing around the flames (Blanchot).

~

It's been said that our name is our first story. I learned to paint mine on an easel, steadying myself with letters. At that time the song I most loved to sing was "Michael Row Your Boat." I loved it because of milk and honey, and for the comfort of its names—Michael, Brother, Sister:

Michael row de boat ashore, Hallelujah!
Michael boat a gospel boat, Hallelujah!
I wonder where my mudder deh.
See my mudder on de rock gwine home.
On de rock gwine home in Jesus' name.
Michael boat a music boat.
Gabriel blow de trumpet horn.
O you mind your boastin' talk.
Boastin' talk will sink your soul.

Brudder, lend a helpin' hand.
Sister, help for trim dat boat.
Jordan stream is wide and deep.
Jesus stand on t' oder side.
I wonder if my maussa deh.
My fader gone to unknown land.
O de Lord he plant his garden deh.
He raise de fruit for you to eat.
He dat eat shall neber die.
When de riber overflow.
O poor sinner, how you land?
Riber run and darkness comin'.
Sinner row to save your soul.

As in many of the Black Spirituals (and this is not the version I learned), the words give instruction from slave to slave on how to access freedom, how to break out of the story that has been written for you: don't talk about it, don't boast, code it in song. Or the song or the poem creates a momentary erasable bridge when the structural bridge is not there and is too dangerous or impossible to build.

Michael's boat is a music boat. It's the song itself, and only it will get you free, or maybe it does and maybe it doesn't, since we don't really know if the "mudder" or the "maussa" will be there when we get there. Still, it's no body that will save you—only the fragile, temporary, wild beauty of song:

Wild Nights—Wild Nights!
Were I with thee
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!

I read that too once I could read. And it's Dickinson who said of beauty, "Chase and it ceases." Like wind in the grasses, you can't overtake it. Fear she called a stimulus, an impetus and a spur. One draws you forward, the other pushes you from behind—it's the same wind on either side. Put your boat into that wild ("Done with the Compass—/ Done with the Chart!"), that Eden.

~

Once I started sleeping again and found myself an ordinary person, riding buses and drinking coffee, standing around in a singular body in the endless sun, I was stunned by my own excess, excess of presence, of bright dailyness. Sidewalks felt a lot harder then under my feet, and the air sharper—my senses were so revealed. That sounds emotional. It wasn't. It was physical. One morning the sky was all Easter, so pink and salmon, so baby blue, I thought it must be kidding. Going for walk, making a meal, it all seemed obscene.

Says Keats's muse, describing those who are not poets: "they are no dreamers weak/ They seek no wonder but the human face, / No music but a happy noted voice." And in case the reader thinks Keats feels superior to these others, Keats has his muse tell him, "thou art less than they." Poetry is companion to those who live in fear, for those who fall asleep anyway: "Thou art a dreaming thing; / a fever of thyself." To put it more bluntly, the terror of the unnarratable, unnamable "I" that I encounter in sleep and in my mother's mind full of holes is fucking the beauty I want—the anarchic violent poem.

~

So I consider my mother once again, who, with no narratives left ("discarding the ceremony of consciousness / drifting into nothing") is, one could say, no longer a mother, who, without linear time, can no longer love me. (And if she's no longer a mother, than I'm no longer her child—now a dead child.) Or maybe emotions, once set into action, continue indefinitely like entropic molecules, even after the person who "felt" the emotion can no longer "feel" it or say it or know it. Maybe love stands outside of narrative time anyway. Like language, is it just something people walk into? Row out into? Is love, then, a condition, rather than a feeling? Like language, a condition, not of the person, but of the world?

Spirit Ditties of No Tone: On Listening

Hearing is full of doubt: phenomenological doubt of the listener about the heard and himself hearing it. Hearing does not offer a meta-position; there is no place where I am not simultaneously with the heard. However far its source, the sound sits in my ear.

—Salome Voegelin (xii)

Listening…waits in the silence that fills the future lying all about the utterance.

—Susan Stewart (101)

1.

Hearing and listening. What's the difference? We ask our children to be "good listeners." We don't mean that they should have ears full of doubt, that sound should "sit in their ears." By "listen" we mean, understand, and, if I am giving orders, obey. Jean-Luc Nancy writes of the "slight keen indecision that grates, rings out, or shouts between 'listening' and 'understanding': between two kinds of hearing…between a sense (that one listens to) and a truth (that one understands), although the one, in the long run, cannot do without the other." Can one do without the other? Roland Barthes begins his essay "Listening" with an attempt to parse the difference between the physiological act of hearing and the psychological act of listening. What might happen if we try, even for a moment, confronting language, to foreground the former?

As usual I've been spending time listening to poets read, but not only to their poems, also "my ear bends" to the things they say before, after, between, and to the introductions, that interstitial language—its murmuring, its hesitation, its rhythms: "OK, Charles, I'll just jump right in." Or, "This poem's speaker loves obsolescence." Listening too to academic talks, their particular banter: "pinching and elliptical grammar," says someone; "we're spinning out of emplotment," says another; "the standard view of modern science is a disarranged intellect that lacks an object"; "the triumphal narrative of the emergence of a rational-critical sphere." Lifted from context, each line traverses a rhythmic and sonorous landscape, which I try, with my ears, to "see."

Listening, writes Barthes, "is a mode of defense against surprise." Making sense of sound, we protect ourselves against the unknown. What if instead of defending, we were to court the surprise, the untranslated noise? What if we turn toward, or even create, what Susan Howe calls a "conscious phonemic cacophony" of found sound?

While listening, I've been writing (there is no "while"; I do one or the other), getting down every third word or so as I try to keep my writing in time with my listening. Writing what "sits in my ear," the heard sentences, produces new ones that bear a ghostly relation to their source, as if clothing without a body—all surface, no substance (or so is the fantasy). Listening to "the blind sight of sound" (Voegelin), I am looking for ways to escape the deliberations of thinking, to "spin out of emplotment," to become a "disarranged intellect," to move sound into an improvisatory mode. I want the physiological process, distilled, to get to an affective state I can't really name—presence, perhaps.

"The reception of sound might be framed as a *feeling*," writes Stewart, as if the act of hearing, and not the interpretation of the thing heard, is the source of emotion, as if "tuning the ear" is an affective act. But it is. Taking in sound as an abstract (or nearly abstract) surface forces me to take note of the intense sound-scape I'm always living inside of anyway, but that I mostly ignore in an attempt to make sense. Undifferentiated listening reveals the pure functioning of sensation—in other words, the welling up of living, of being alive.

Still, it's an imperfect practice. Suspended between its own preoccupations and cognitions and its availability to another's voice, another's sound, attention seems to hover. "The auditory…manages to trouble…the clear distinction between subject and object, inside and the outside, self and the world" (Bull). I start calling this process *Think Tank:*

*

Injured fugitives from the markets generously ask for too
    little

    I'm wishing for gardens and salty stars without
        context—

far too extravagant—and then the phone rings with a light
    of its own

Fog returns a catalogue

*

Pinching and elliptical grammar sits slightly tipped at the
    horizon. Huge invoices

        collapse in my eyes

Irresponsible and aimless, this is a white clock, a white

        cock and billowing flowers in ignorance tender, in
            ignorance draw

        incoherent patterns through the candlelight

*

"It is in the engagement with the world, rather than in its perception that the world and myself are constituted," writes Voegelin. "The task" of engagement through listening, she goes on, "is to suspend, as much as possible, ideas of genre, category, purpose, and art historical context, to achieve a hearing that is the material heard, now." This is an engagement with sound about as close

to pure sensation as you can get. Voegelin is talking about listening to music, but words too can be material sound—as they might be for a baby, or an animal.

Barthes considers such "open" listening an ethical practice: "listening is *taking soundings*…what is plumbed by listening is intimacy, the heart's secret: Sin." To listen to another, in a Catholic context as in a psychoanalytic one, is to commit to intimacy, to begin an attempt to heal that other, or oneself (confession understood here not as a prelude to punishment, but as the first step in healing). Pauline Oliveros also draws a direct connection between listening and compassion. Her "deep listening" is a way of expanding the soundscape one feels ready to acknowledge, thereby stretching the boundaries of one's ability to "feel with." Barthes quotes Freud to explain that the ideal listener must not actively interpret the thing heard, must "simply…listen and not trouble to keep in mind anything in particular." But he acknowledges how readily the analyst/priest will fail at this unadulterated absorption of sound. As Stewart disappointingly reminds us: "sounds…are never heard outside an expectation of meaning." There is no *pure* listening, no *pure* sound.

But what about mystical theories of language, such as Walter Benjamin's concept of the "pure language" behind all languages:

> That which seeks to represent, to produce itself in the evolving of languages, is that very nucleus of pure language….In this pure language—which no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages—all information, all sense, and all intension finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished.

If verbal sounds are divided, however fleetingly, however imperfectly, from their meaning, does that momentary "extinguishing" of intension and information reveal something of great value, something *more*? The "critical question," writes scholar Susan Handelman (responding to Benjamin), "is what is meant by that 'something more' that 'something else,' that 'abyss' or 'depth' in language that both mystics and poets sense and explore—a nihilistic void or a depth of divine mystery? Is the 'beyond' the negative abyss of all meaning and expression…or a higher, fuller realm of meaning?" In a short piece called "The Dismemberment of Language" (published in 1928 and excerpted from his *Origin of*

the German Tragic Drama), Benjamin writes admiringly of "words, syllables and sound emancipated from all traditional associations of meaning" in Baroque drama. In these plays, he writes, "The vocalized word is only haunted by meaning…as if by an inescapable illness."

Liberated or healed, words might become what Susan Howe calls a "nonsense soliloquy replete with transgressive nudges…a vocalized wilderness format of slippage and misshapen dream projection."

In *Think Tank*'s active meditation on or *of* listening, I have tried to delay or blur the expectation of understanding long enough to approach such wilderness in the present. In writing poems whose primary intention was to access an affective state of acceptance (in sight, if not at the site, of love), I cajoled listening to tank thought. And yet language's desire to narrate cannot be fully extinguished; it smolders in word order, which strains toward familiarity. In that tension between listening to language as sound and translating those sounds into language once again burdened, even if lightly, by some story—that's where this writing has hovered.

*

Yeasted minutes leap to

swamp the city's borders

weaken—death

sings at the window, at the snow's and my

effort to amass new minutes

to leap from a "start-up" smash-and-grab operation to a

final collage of my face

Spinning out of emplotment and derivative lexicon,
sweet lexicon

toward what lycanthropic dream?

2.

Poetry is…speech framed to be heard for its own sake and interest even over and above its interest of meaning. Some matter and meaning is essential to it but only as an element necessary to support and employ the shape which is contemplated for its own sake. (Poetry is in fact speech only employed to carry the inscape of speech for the inscape's sake…)

—Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1873

For Hopkins, "inscape" or patterning of the language is "supported" by meaning as a secondary element (this is the reverse of how people commonly think about the relationship between sound and meaning in poetry). Inscape manifests, Hopkins explains, through the process of "oftening, over-and-overing, aftering." In other words, through sound repetition we reveal the supra-semantic play always lurking above or around denotative language. That this surface-oriented poetics delivered pleasure to Hopkins is a claim I cannot make, given his biography. However, certainly his early poems are aimed at joy, and, one can argue, a form of joy (a formal joy?) remains even in the "Terrible Sonnets," though their content, their "matter and meaning" is terror and grief:

> No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
> More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.

Isn't there, in that "wilder wring," a kind of rich pleasure, a sounded intensity that can be heard, or felt, if not thought? After all, it's thinking that causes the most pain to Hopkins. "Thoughts against thoughts in groans grind" he wrote in "Spelt for Sybil's Leaves," while the first lines of "Spelt" offer a tribute to the *ear* that is at the same time a love song to the *ear*th: "Earnest, earthless, equal, attuneable, vaulty, voluminous.…stupendous / Evening strains to be time's vast, womb-of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all night." I cannot not read "ear nest" in that "earnest," for, in fact, the ear is a kind of nest: a woven home for sound.

If the "pangs" of grief are intensified through repetitive or obsessive thinking, language's "pangs" (considered as instances of sound, rather than moments of pain), are its non-reasoned affective resonances. One could say that in Hopkins, even where we find most emotional suffering, we find exulted language, language exulting

through and on its surface. As Novalis, who, despite separation of time and place, seems to have had much in common with Hopkins, wrote, "One fails to comprehend language, because language doesn't comprehend itself, and doesn't want to comprehend itself. The true Sanskrit [i.e., the root language] speaks for the sake of speaking, because speaking is its passion and its essence."

The "pitch" and "ring" of music in Hopkins's poems press against, and to my ear override, the overt narrative content—or they invent another content that the poem and reader must admit. If Hopkins is pitched *past* grief (to another emotion, one he does not name, for maybe it has no name), language's surface pleasures get him there.

And yet Hopkins could not entirely forego the narrative sentence and its pull into linear time—and, it should be said, he was wed to a larger teleological narrative too: that of Revelation. Of the poets since who have been able, in part because of Hopkins as forerunner (and not only because of Dada or Stein), to come much closer to loosening the pull towards semantic sense, I'll end with just one: Jackson Mac Low, whose "Forties,"

written at the close of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, were directly inspired by the sound-scapes of Hopkins (as Mac Low mentions in his "Note on *154 Forties*"). Here is a portion of the densely sonic and decidedly non-teleological poem, "Thought Needles" (selected entirely for how its title seems specifically to echo Hopkins):

This is poetics built on listening—aimed at, though never arriving at, "pure sound." The diacritical marks, hyphens and caesuras act as a musical score, directing a performer very specifically in how to vocalize the text (as detailed in Mac Low's "Note"). Mac Low explains that the language has been "gathered" from words and phrases "ones seen, heard, and thought of." There is no hierarchy of inner and outer. The language that surrounds us is the language that fills us. When Mac Low wrote these poems in foreign lands, he incorporated the language around him, as you can see here with the use of French and Italian. The editing process, like the gathering process, is sonically driven: "Speech framed to be heard."

Toward the end of his essay on listening, Barthes writes of "free listening…a listening which circulates, which

permutates, which disaggregates." These verbs can be heard intransitively: free listening permutates itself, disaggregates itself. This is because in the act of free listening, or what we might call utopian listening, we relinquish our hold on our own narratives. We allow sound to enter us, and, without transforming it into meanings that we already control, we might allow it to transform us. Barthes speaks of the "risk" involved in listening. To hear a person's desire in his or her voice is to enter into that desire, to become it, "ultimately finding oneself there." Again in Barthes's quotation of Freud, without this risk, which is achieved through the "calm quiet attentiveness" of an "evenly hovering attention," there is a danger of "never finding anything but what is already known."

Wannatalk? Whadabout? Montreux marigolds-'n'-ásters
di-moneta-sáilboat sunsparks t'other-shóre
píne-tree pígeon-roost foúntain-front one-two-three-four-five-six-báck
black dóme one-two-three-four – tén hazy láke spritzers
public-flówer-garden fúchia-centered beds
cannas afire statues
Plénitúde linkt – curves sassy *Faunésse*

Describing listening to a composition by John Cage (Mac Low's teacher, collaborator and friend), Barthes writes, "it is each sound one after the next that I listen to, not in its syntagmatic extension, but in its raw and as though vertical *signifying*: by deconstructing itself, listening is externalized, it compels the subject to renounce his 'inwardness.'"

To tank thought is not simply to seek irrationality. It's instead a mode of desire, but one that doesn't yet know, and may never know, its desired object. *Think Tank,* then: a love poem with no object, an imperfect giving over to the other of sound.

Eight 14-Line Poems from Real Life

A 14-line poem on progressive insurance

1. Wit, access, plasticity, surge, and pause
2. To rupture the membrane, to remove the sense of a wall
3. We have the sun on us, and a sentence
4. With a slight pivot, he exits ourselves
5. Is wisdom then a loosening of energies? A rushing in
6. Like insomnia or God?
7. There are rules: shadows folded into snow
8. Take off my face
9. For that which we call thought must be disarmed
10. The impulse is to pass behind a cloud
11. The house helps keep the skirt down
12. I'll sleep all night
13. Hand holding a silicone earplug
14. Snow falling lightly over fear

A 14-line poem on the idea of freedom

1. The spirit of
2. malice survives
3. the direct exertion
4. of malice. Give up
5. the desire to be female
6. The whatever-being
7. defined not by what it is
8. and not by what it belongs to
9. but by belonging
10. itself. The spirit of
11. maleness survives the direct
12. exertion of maleness. Give it
13. over to be fucked
14. into the non-state of being in common

A 14-line poem with dream, news, and the economy

1. A dark corner lit
2. The copies of trees
3. Not mine but a made place
4. The real renews itself each year
5. I'll do whatever the radio suggests
6. There lies the body; there lies the marvel
7. Faced with the extravagance of fruits
8. These words are all words
9. I'm scuffed awake
10. How could I possibly join such urgency to such a quiet frame of mind?
11. Illustriously useless poetics
12. Announces nothing; is itself the annunciation
13. Then there is the hidden quality of genitals
14. Hurtling us even farther from the sun

A 14-line poem on time

1. I determine to penetrate this strange longing
2. I am calm and stained
3. It flashes it prays it spreads
4. A lie on the lip of the day
5. The balloon in the wet grass remarks Evelyn
6. Sits for a long time swaying or bobbing only slightly
7. Can you with your seven rats slow down
8. And now the eyes gaze out from the wall
9. The orange flames of the body in the street
10. It suffers it matures it approaches
11. I cannot show beauty to you
12. I as old as I am am illusionary
13. Some come at last
14. Radio hour sun

A 14-line poem on the family

1. how strange the mother's voice
2. does the cat eat like a dog?
3. everything tends toward the solid, the heavy
4. the vulgar
5. Dad laughs as though
6. the sway of these dead rhythms
7. were one with his skin
8. I picture him alone
9. "to begin" "to lead" eventually "to rule"
10. this is my pouty response
11. a "philosophical" (systematic) approach to life
12. one can only attempt never achieve such an approach, following glimpses
13. this gift without a giver
14. my see-through belly

A 14-line poem on love

1. I have nothing to sell
2. I am the sign master
3. It inflates or fucks or loves
4. A spray of blood a luminous branch
5. The beginning is the negation
6. Of the beginning
7. Can you help me make my lunch
8. And now the phone is silent in my hand
9. The exaggerated beauty of the cello bow
10. It rattles it sinks it fingers
11. I was a child reading law
12. I wanted everyone to know I'd given my food away
13. Some mothers leave their families
14. Red chair white chair rug

A 14-line poem on the end of this

1. I am
2. very hungry
3. but not a
4. foreigner or a
5. slave I am
6. content not to be
7. read or pressed
8. into service I serve
9. anyway in an enclosure
10. falsely made
11. believed in only momentarily
12. abandoned for an opening
13. that itself closes
14. I un-repent

Another 14-line poem on the end

1. I am a
2. very sorry
3. but not
4. worried citizen
5. I have stolen
6. so many languages where
7. does my body end
8. hooked rather abruptly
9. by my friend
10. into a collective orientation
11. toward the knowledge-object as future
12. project I adore
13. the gap
14. between what I want and what I know

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Julie Carr is the author of six books of poetry, most recently *100 Notes on Violence*, *RAG* and the forthcoming *Think Tank* (Solid Objects, 2015). She is also the author of *Surface Tension: Ruptural Time and the Poetics of Desire in Late Victorian Poetry*, and the co-editor of *Active Romanticism: The Radical Impulse in Nineteenth-Century and Contemporary Poetic Practice*, forthcoming from University of Alabama Press (2015). Carr was a 2011–12 NEA fellow and is an associate professor at the University of Colorado in Boulder, where she teaches in the Creative Writing MFA program and the Intermedia Arts Writing and Performance PhD program. She regularly collaborated with dance artist K. J. Holmes. She lives in Denver and helps to run Counterpath Press and Counterpath Gallery.

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