

PUBLIC

Not a catalogue, but a document—working. Not incomplete, but at labor, on itself. Not a supplement, but an extension: of a book, about Louis Sullivan, his complicity. With the genocide that made his presence possible: on the land, as an architect. I asked: what would happen if I let the land read my poems? So I went to Iowa, I went to Chicago, and I buried them for a summer. Then I dug them up. Published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name, first at the Lookout Gallery in East Lansing, Michigan then at Public Space One in Iowa City, Iowa. Fall 2026.

PAPERS

Toby Altman

Public Papers

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Cover and book design: Toby Altman

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www.essaypress.org

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People

Paige: She made the paper from native fibers, willow mostly.

Margaret: She printed them, then she printed them again.

Alicia and Jonathan: We watched snooker together; I slept on their air-mattress.

Bruna and Felipe: I buried my poems in their yard, in Grinnell; their rabbit offered its shit to fertilize the site.

Lauren: And her yard too, in Iowa City, where once I watched a team of goats mow the field beyond.

Sara: And hers. She gave me a cup of cold water and a shady spot in the suburbs.

Emily: We share this house, and many others.

Toby: I know nothing about him.

Places

Iowa City, Grinnell, Chicago, East Lansing—and the spaces in between, on the Greyound, on the train, in the car. I tried to get as close to his banks and buildings as I could. As close to the spaces where my life has been.

Twenty Weathered Sentences

(from a failed grant proposal)

1. the first architect in America
to come to know himself
with any fullness in relation
to his soil period and civilization
2. these projects are sympathetic
and mutually reinforcing
there is no right way to read them
3. eight banks
in remote reaches of the upper Midwest
4. nearly destitute and rejected
5. the historical conditions that make
architecture possible
6. I have the same material relationship to it
7. violence is its condition
8. how can poetry respond to this history
9. evidently it cannot
10. no response will be
adequate to the scale of loss
11. but poetry does invent
different ways of
land and language
12. what happens if we let the land
speak back to the practices
that have been imposed upon it
13. what happens when the land begins to read
14. as the seeds grow, they rewrite with their roots.
15. species which were decimated
by European agriculture and architecture
16. different forms of weathering
depending on where they were buried
17. displayed in the condition we find them
stained damaged threaded with roots
18. i am proposing that poems are
provisional objects which might
change and grow even after
they are apparently finished
19. i propose to let the land answer
that question for itself
20. an alternate logic by which we might
engage with this place
 the Midwest the United States
 its history



*margaret and the poems
she printed.
(in what sense are they
mine?)
a cafe in iowa city;
mr. brightside on the stereo*

1. Burial, its materials

its materials:

a poem I wrote on the amtrak / greyhound

interviews I did with my friends

pictures of I took of:

my poems

my friends

the places I buried them

(my poems)

the seeds I buried with them

dandelions, grasses, dead leaves, lawn

You Handle Dust Going to a Long Country

4/27. East Lansing to Chicago on the Amtrak.

These are the things I saw
on my way to Chicago:

(1) lilac in the culvert
unguarded, unfinished.

(2) A cement mixer,
drum spinning
to keep its content
from setting
Prairie Materials
(its name)

Who was I
when I was writing this?

If I can't make it cohere
it's because the world

in which I work
does not cohere.

To answer would require more.
More than longing's capture.

Starting from the surface,
the plow cuts its way toward:

(1) the cold

(2) the infertile stone within

What is your relation to the land on which you live?

Alicia: I think about everything I would like to grow,
but I have not taken the time to plant.

Jonathan: I used to think of Iowa as being—I remember sitting out on your lawn when you lived in Davenport and feeling like a marble that was being rolled around in an enormous steel drum. I don't know why the steel drum, it just was the nearest thing I could think of to something that was somewhat flat but still had a concavity to it.

There's a sort of lostness that I think one feels in America, which is co-equal with a feeling of freedom as well. But that's the thing that I had a long time ago, and I think being in the middle of the continent, you just sort of feel like, you're here, you're in it. And you can't roll off the edges.

Alicia: If I actually literally think about any land, I just want to go be in it. Like under the ground. Which is not—which may or may not be—a death wish. I don't know. I think about, I think about the yard a lot. I do think about things in terms of, like, strata or stratification.

What is your relation to the land on which you live?

Margaret: I have a complicated relationship with Iowa right now, because our state is falling apart environmentally. I'm thinking a lot about our water and about how Iowa is the most changed in our country. It's destroying—like, we all have cancer. It's very complicated. And I'm not sure how much hope I have for that. But I also find the state very, very beautiful, and even agland, I find very beautiful.

I'm Midwest till I die. I will never leave this region. But I also want it to be better. It's a love, a love-hate relationship. It's fear. I'm scared of what we're doing in Iowa. I feel very anchored here. But also sort of afraid of it and disappointed.

I've been learning a lot about when it was first colonized and people were first starting to farm here in a big way. People were growing all sorts of things. We were the biggest oat producer in the country. We were one of the biggest apple producers in the country. And now we're just corn and soy, basically, and pigs. And it's destroying waterways everywhere down into the Gulf of Mexico.

You Handle Dust Going to a Long Country

4/28. Chicago to Iowa City on the Greyhound.

From my place on the Greyhound,
I watch the country establish itself:
I saw:

Oak Park
Lisle
Downer's Grove
a van from the Blackhawk
Moving Company cuts
in front of us and
power flows from its
socket into my device.

There is no building without
the strike of the hammer,
driving one thing into another.

Western Illinois: the fields are black,
flat as skating rinks. From one mile
to the next, I saw:

a gravel pit, its
shallow azure moat
and the traffic
that passed it
was this exact
flowing thing,
not life but life
in general.

When I lived here, I was still young,
and though I knew that death
could visit us, I did not think

he was close. So, the mode is:
archival
intimacy
agony/history

I like a highway with a wide margin
where infant grasses lift
their fringe. Something
is happening there, toward
which my yearning is set.

There are:
groves to shelter the farmhouses
from the open space that surrounds them.

And even if we were to disappear
today, the prairie would not return,

restoring itself. There is too little
of it left. And the trees—

evergreen, cottonwood, oak
are too thick on the ground.

From the window of a moving bus,
the shattered cornstalks from last year's
season seem to glitter in the sun—
they do glitter. And a prison bus
crosses above us on the overpass,
heading back the way we came.

The bus goes all the way
to Denver, even if
the passengers get off earlier.
The travelers that were give
their seats to the travelers who wait
at the curb for their ride to arrive.

What is your relation to the land on which you live?

Felipe: When we moved here—this was summer 2024—we were leaving St. Louis from an area that was quite dangerous. Dangerous, as in violence. And when we got here, I was still reliving some of the traumatic experiences that I went through there. Because of our pet rabbit, we needed to find a need to find a place to buy hay. So I called a local store, and I asked them if they had any hay. The person on the phone laughed. *Yeah, we do got hay.* So I went there and there was her favorite hay on the shelf. It was just this one little bag of hay. Her favorite kind. I grabbed it, bought it, and then I was in the parking lot with hay on the hood of the car, crying at the sunset. It was as cliché as it sounds, but to me, that was a realization that I was in a safe place. Of course, it didn't have the hay specifically for her. But somehow it felt that way.

But then, of course, on the day to day, as you get into this place that is so white, you can't help but—I couldn't help but—feel more alienated than I was in St. Louis as a person of color. My skin tone, my accent, all those things became very evident. It wasn't until I started to birdwatch that I started to feel like I belonged in this land a little bit more, that the birds, they saw me, they sang back at me.

Bruna: Or they didn't stop singing because you were there.

What is your relation to the land on which you live?



*poems in an envelope (flax);
seeds—milkweed, coneflower,
big blue stem.
positioned—just below
the surface, scraped;
in Bruna and Felipe's yard*

Lindsey: We are renters on stolen land. There's a beautiful broken tree in our front yard, and we look at it a lot. There are squirrels that live in it. And our son likes to watch them.

Dallin: I grew up in Washington where there were lots of orchards and vineyards. And for some reason, you're invited to go between the trees. It's built to have people inside of where you're growing the food. Here, how do you go into a soybean field or cornfield? You can't. So it feels like we're on an island, an island in the corn and the soy.

You Handle Dust Going to a Long Country

4/29. Grinnell.

Poetry is a way to know the place you are,
I thought as I walked toward Bruna's house.
Then I buried my poems in her yard.
We spoke about the birds she hears,
she and Felipe. The song of a cardinal,
the cry of a jay—it is enough to anchor
them in place. I scattered seeds across
the envelope of poems, envelope of flax
and willow, pinkish from its change,
from plant to paper. I scattered seeds
and buried them in rabbit shit.
Felipe offered it to me: to help
the seeds unfurl toward themselves.

At lunch, Dallin and Lindsey spoke
of living on an island, corn and soy
all around them, enclosed in fecundity.
Everywhere on the brink—*collapse*
is the word people keep using.
Fertilizer in the rivers, toxic metals
carried through the air. And when I
returned to it, the building gave me

immense blue (skylight); skin-like
rose window; composed only of itself.
Do not ask what it is or what it means.
It is, it means. Everyone, I said then,
is carrying more than they can manage.
More than they can understand.
What is your portion, how do you hold it?
These are the questions I am asking.

You Handle Dust Going to a Long Country

4/30. Iowa City to Chicago on the Greyhound again.

Later, in The Encounter Café, I ordered
a coffee and a muffin from a Mennonite
in a paper bonnet, asking, answering,
ordinary questions:

whole milk okay?

Do you want that warmed up?

What is this band of relation
that binds us to each other
for the length of a transaction?

Cada día, te extraño menos, the singer says.
When I paid, I walked beyond
her line of vision into another space
in the brightly lit café.

We had been speaking of the collective,
Alicia, Jonathan, and I, the way that poets
invite manyness into the work:
dreams, voices, desires. Where in this
many-colored chorus do you hear
the land, the land as it actually is:
feedlots and construction sites,
the cracked tarmac where empty
tractor trailers wait for their loads?

I would like to:

drink your image,
drink it like wine,
holding it in my mouth,
for its quietness to arrive.

What is your relation to the land on which you live?



Lauren: I feel like it's not my land. Not necessarily for any woke reason—I just feel like at any point, the government or someone else is gonna come and take it. So, I don't feel any, grasping. I only feel love. And that's good, because I know that it's not...I know that all things pass, you know?

*the site:
unbroken country
lauren baldeman's
backyard
iowa city
28 miles from the nearest Sullivan bank*

What is your relation to the land on which you live?



*buried, sara wainscott's yard
the site is disturbed
but not for long
the rock, included
so I can find my way*

Sara: Before we bought this house, the man who lived here raised monarch caterpillars into butterflies. That's why there's so much milkweed planted in the backyard: he propagated all of that for his monarch project. And he would give out jars of caterpillars to all the children in the neighborhood. We would come over and get fresh milkweed leaves every week to feed the caterpillars. So, they cocooned and then hatched and flew away.

Nancy, Dale's wife across the street, calls gardening a *ten year plan*. So everything always looks little failed and messy. I think that's okay. It's this nice space where time moves in both directions.

What is your relation to the land on which you live?



*about twenty feet
from where I'm sitting now—
I watered it most days
this summer, passing
quickly over the place
where nothing grows*

Emily: We've been living here for about a year and a half now. And it still feels a little bit distant. We've led a very transient life up till now and we've never lived anywhere more than two or three years at a time. And so, it feels like this is just a short-term place, even though we're hoping that it won't be.

I'm trying to make a home and a life here, unexpectedly—trying to raise my child here. But even though I feel like every year we're making progress towards that, it still feels like a distance.

In terms of, the land itself, I think “owning” a place doesn't really change my relationship versus renting it. But I appreciate that we're kind of trying to turn our small part of it into some kind of nice, a garden that has a relationship to what it might have been a long time ago—planting native plants and making it a nice place to be.

You Handle Dust Going to a Long Country

5/1. Chicago to East Lansing on the Amtrak.

The air is much sweeter here, Dallin said.
And Sara showed me the place
in her garden where Egan tried to kill
the daylilies and failed—they are back
this spring, like the last, thicker
than ever. I have been brought
into brotherhood with them.
I belong to the things I've seen.

On my last night in Iowa, I went
with Alicia and Jonathan to sit
on a bridge above the Cedar River,
the three of us alone with:
 the wind
 the water,
 which had overrun
 its banks, working
 into the woodland beyond.

No te vaya sin saber, the singer says.
I could not leave if I did not think
I would be back for the things
I have buried there. What we said
 I will not say again.
 It is not mine.
Not the words themselves
but the way we said it,
the language and something
beneath it. It holds the whole
ocean in it. Once the well is open
it cannot be closed again.

2. *Growing Season*

*I put my poems
in the ground
and left them there
all summer,
while something
happened
underground:
 reading
 decaying
 changing
an action without
an author*

How did you come to be here?

Alicia: When I was little, looking out
at the trees behind my house
on Saddle Mountain, I felt
very weird and displaced.
Staring out at the trees
from the vantage of my
bedroom window I felt
a profound sense
of unbelonging, even then.

So much of the project
of having a family was to ensure
a sense of place and belonging.
And I still I felt removed from that.

How did you come to be here?

Jonathan: I think of it as being about perpetual displacement—and home and attachment being the transcendental signified, the thing that's never quite there. There's this differentiation that one goes through when one moves country. And when it's also in your family as well, you never really know where you come from. In a way, it does sort of feel inevitable that Alicia and I would be mirroring each other in that way—
contrapuntal,
as Edward Said would have put it.

How did you come to be here?

Dallin: We've had conversations
sometimes like, if you could move
anywhere, where would you go?

Sometimes I've thought about
my childhood where I do have
much more of a connection to the land.

Would I move back to a place
where I connect with the land
maybe most—but without any,

without any job, without any reason,
without anything else besides the place,
in proximity to a place that I have

these childhood times with?
Would I do that? So far no.

How did you come to be here?

Bruna: I got a job. I got a job
in Grinnell, Iowa. School
actually has taken me
a lot of places. That's why
we both went abroad
for college. It's just, you know,
if you get a full ride
to a really fancy school—
I never felt like I was
in a position to say no.

And that's exactly also how
I ended up in this place.
I got a nice job. I'm never
gonna say no to it. I probably
will die with this job. The location
was almost secondary in a way.

How did you come to be here?

Sara: When the house flooded,
he just said, *fuck this. I'm tired
of relying on landlords
when we complain about things
to not fix them. Everything is
ruined now. I'm not gonna be
in that position again.*

And we bought this house.
Nothing very glamorous about it.

Toby: I don't think I knew that.

Sara: Three feet of sewage.

Toby: I'm sorry, I'm sorry
about that. That's awful.

Sara: You know things are
just things. The only thing
that I lost were family photos.
My grandma's engagement picture,
things like that. That is the kind
of thing that bums me out a little.
But no one died, it's just stuff.

How much do you know about history? How much do want to know about it?

Jonathan: We're probably the first generation that grew up with some sort of understanding that history, was, well—we grew up with history from below. But I think we're also the first generation that has dispensed with the Whiggish notion of history's progress. I certainly knew from as long as I can conceptualize a long past the truth of Benjamin's remark about civilization and barbarism being two sides of the same coin.

How much do you know about history? How much do want to know about it?

Margaret: I feel I know very little about history. That was, like, my worst class in high school. I was too young to conceptualize time passing. We were family friends with my AP World History teacher, and I did so bad on a test once that he said to my mom, *I'm worried about Margaret.* I was like, *Really?* I just couldn't conceptualize the passage of time in that way when I was 16.

How much do you know about history? How much do want to know about it?

Lindsey: I've been interested in scent, in part because that's a different kind of knowledge of history. The way the past smelled. That's not something that you can document in a straightforward way. It's not information you can get from language. There are lots of people who are trying to recreate that. But there are

plenty of materials that are illegal, or endangered, or extinct, or very dangerous, or otherwise inaccessible.

But the other thing is, vintage perfumes macerate. The materials in the perfume continue to have a chemical relationship with each other. I don't know what it smelled like because it's been sitting for decades. It's richer and warmer. There's some things that have started to decay. And don't smell quite right. But some that smell much richer because they've had a conversation over the decades. I'm touched sometimes by the impulse, the urge, to touch the past, to try to reach it. All the ways that fails—that's not a limitation.

3. *Unburying*

*nobody
is the author
of these things
for better
or worse,
emily said*

You Handle Dust Going to a Long Country

8/6. In Chicago, driving through.

I saw it thru a fractured
light—insomniac and
the elements shatter

perception,
unglued, ungathered
 the statue of Charity
 white streak of bird
 shit running down
 her breast;
 boneset, approximately
 in flower.

Seven hours medicated sleep
and syntax returns—the place
that I travel through has
a name.

 I found, by the lake,
a stand of serviceberry,
unmarked, humble.
I touched their leaves to test
 the waxiness,
 the texture—
 all flourishing is mutual

Yes, I would like to make:
 a small abundance
 a rattling surface
 a place for butterflies
 and others
 black winged stranger
 gathering and giving.

You Handle Dust Going to a Long Country

8/7. In Iowa, before unburying.

Probably nothing happened, I thought
all the way across Illinois. *The poems
are waiting for me, still a surface, discrete
and ordered, a place where writing happens.*
How will I exhibit them, these poems I gave
to the land, and which the land refused
to read, returning them to me?
What will I do with these questions,
I wondered, questions I gave
to my friends and which returned
to me wrong. One does not *have*
a relation to the land. One *is* that relation.

Is, was, will be.

A verb, of motion.

Each moment renewing
the relation in which my life means.

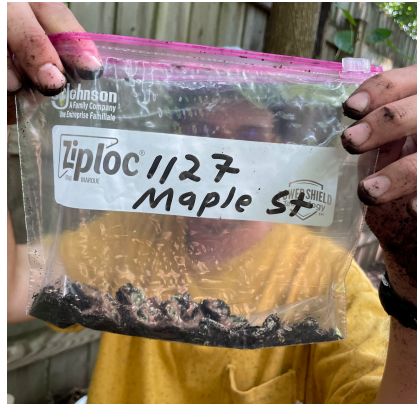
Now I am writing in the cemetery
where Zoya and I used to wander.
There are men here, riding their mowers
across the space between the headstones.
The marker is the changeless thing.
Everything else must be managed
and maintained; it withers and flowers,
white ball of clover which takes
its nourishment from the settler dead.
No te vayas sin saber.

Don't leave without
knowing. Or: don't leave
without knowing it.

Is this a general or a particular grief?
Sweet rose of Sharon, abide with me.
I choose to let the mystery be.

Iowa City

Buried 4.29.26. Unburied 8.7.26



Pictured (clockwise from the top left):

- (1) the site, where nothing grew, except a string of strawberry, crossing under the fence from the neighbor's yard*
- (2) raking the dirt with my fingers, an almost archeological act*
- (3) what I found*
- (4) everything I found*

I asked the land to read my poems and the land abolished them.

Grinnell

Buried 4.29.26. Unburied 8.7.26



Pictured (clockwise from the top left):

- (1) the landlord's grasses*
- (2) and beneath it, strangely golden*
- (3) the roots of the lawn grass growing through it*
- (4) waiting, in tupperware, like someone's leftover lunch*

It abolished my language. Something survived, but it has no writing on it.

Chicago

Buried 4.30.26. Unburied 8.9.26



Pictured (clockwise from the top left):

- (1) a dweller, with the poems. Potentially their reader.
- (2) in motion, the thickness of the mulch above it.
- (3) I worked my hands under and around—
- (4) soft/ continuous shell

It is no longer a surface which writing receives.

East Lansing

Buried 5.6.26. Unburied 8.13.26



Pictured (clockwise from the top left):

- (1) digging in the wrong place. beneath hydrangeas that someone else planted.
- (2) my property is behind me. It is part of what the artifact means.
- (3) "I own this stolen land"—the title of one of my father's pieces.
- (4) from this relation, I have raised nothing but thistles.

*Not a source of meaning, but a source of nourishment.
Not discrete sheets, but a sodden mass.*

Who is the author of money? Who is the author of grass?

*Choral (the many voices and genders,
not together but
not apart)*

The author of money might be
the editor, the person who prepares
the work. The author of grass
is the reader, or the storyteller.
And death is the author of grass.

The author of money is some
major bitch. My greatest enemy.
Probably some white man.
Or Julius Caesar. Debt is
the author of money, I guess:
it only exists because of lack of it.

There's grass that's authored,
grass that's not. The grass
that's authored is a facsimile
of the real grass. We didn't grow
this grass, but our landlord
is very passionate about it.

They mow it an insane amount.
And he's sent us a text message
that the garden needs a little bit
more work. I'm like, all right, sir.

Who is the author of money? Who is the author of grass?

*Choral (moving—like grass seed
moving—like money)*

I think the author of grass
is God and sunlight.
I think the author of money
wishes he or she were
the author of grass.

I'm thinking about growth,
thinking about how
the author of grass grows
the grass at one rate.
There's one rate of growth.

And the author of money
has an exponential growth
pattern in mind, a more
imaginary growth pattern
in mind. I think the author
of grass knows how to rest.

4. *On Display*

*I put my poems
on the wall;
in bags and boxes*

*so they could become
the source
of shadow*

*in a white
space.*

You Handle Dust Going to a Long Country

9/4. In East Lansing, installing.

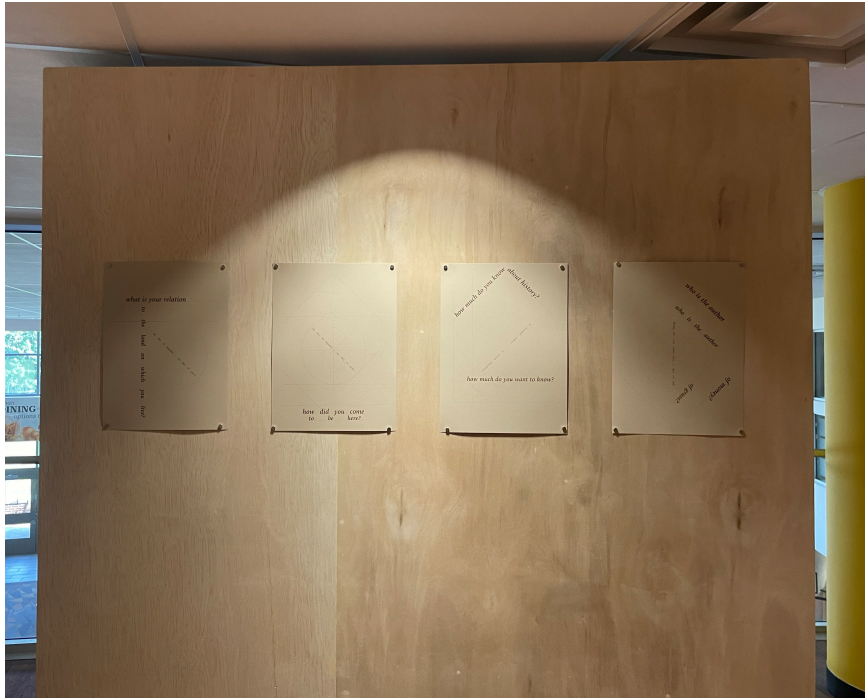
They greet him with their fragrance,
Steve said, speaking of the sycamores—
and, in that way, he can see around
corners. He was walking his dog
in the dark and it greets him:
 childhood,
 Ohio.

And I who do not possess
my senses—I travelled
with him, mapping:
 the objects,
 their relations,
 in space.
The things
that still need
to be sanded,
washed, and painted.

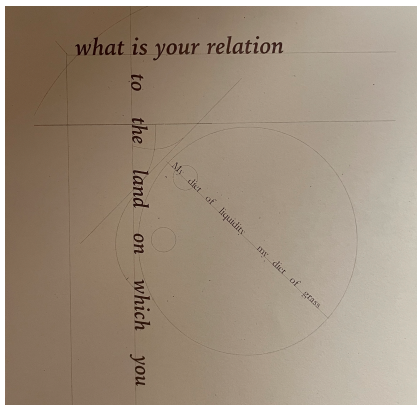
Two weeks after surgery.
The pain that pursues me
is difficult to localize:
it radiates. It is radiant.

On Display

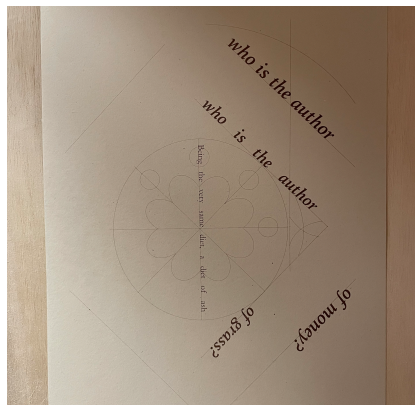
as of 9.10.26



*the questions greet you as you enter the space.
the questions whose answers have been
our burden*



*as in music—a chorus, a refrain,
a continuous low drown*



that supports a melody

You Handle Dust Going to a Long Country

9/8. In East Lansing, installing.

You're getting to know that wall
in ways I haven't yet, Steve says,
as I sink pushpins to anchor
the magnets, the wall drifting,
even with its wheels locked
under the pressure I apply
to it. So I work in:

the negative space
the space between

the object
and its anchors

holding the wall
in place
with my foot.

I have eaten nothing but liquids
today: the pulped and plastic
smoothie which I drank entire
and did not touch my hunger.

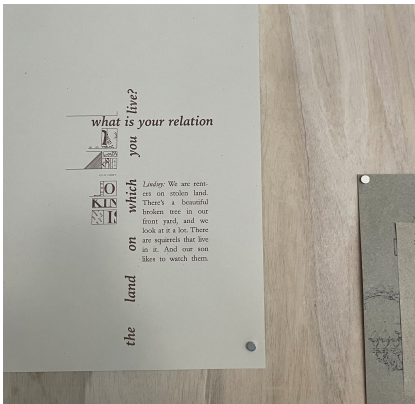
Does it arrive? the relentless
clarity that Steve describes to me
as we work. Three days of fasting,
he says and beyond—then it comes.

We are putting language on a wall.
Not to make it beautiful, but so
all its horror can be said. It has:
the whole ocean in it.
the ocean and all its dead.

On Display
as of 9.10.26



*the burden: all the history
that made architecture happen here
or as much of it as I can say*



*on the far side of a moving wall,
reprinted, in its entirety. The meaning of this making is*



*a poem, also called Public Papers
over there.*

You Handle Dust Going to a Long Country

9/9. In East Lansing, installing.

I would not leave without knowing.
So I drove the slow way home
from Grinnell, storm
at my side, horse tails of dust
where dirt roads meet

pavement. Yet the rain
did not arrive. All that
threat and origin—and
the car rattled against it.

I would not leave without knowing it.
The poet situates herself
alongside a memory,
which was a living man.

And when she begins to sing
it is not of him, but the world
in which he lived, where,

even now, the dusk is
encountering the children
in the street. The world

is made for them
and they know. It takes
what it is told to take:

their presence
which is expended like:
a handful of seed.

On Display
as of 9.10.26
a substance that continues to decay



Grinnell



Iowa City



Chicago



East Lansing



Gallery view—the decaying things, in relation to each other.



Gallery view—in relation to unburied things. They persist in having language on them, despite what the land has taught them.

Is there anything else that came up for you as we were talking that you wanted to say?

Sara: Oh, I'm sure a lot later. I'm excited to see what happens back there.

Toby: Yeah, me too. I have no idea.

Sara: I have no idea. I have some idea. Something will grow.

Toby: If only dandelions.

Sara: If only dandelions. And those little, tiny maple trees.

Toby: Yeah.

Sara: I like the idea of your poems being part of the cycle of the seasons. I wish they were staying back there longer, but the constraints are the constraints, which is what makes this a poem. I'm wondering, how—I'm really curious about the degree to which the poems are damaged. And what that means for poetry.

Toby: In some ways that's a question of authorship, right? I offer the objects that we put in the ground just now, but whatever happens to them, I have no authorial control over.

Sara: Of course, this is spring and there are flowers blooming everywhere and part of what I'm looking forward to is planting things to watch them grow, but you know your joke about grave digging tools does suggest the other kind of planting. I've been thinking about that a lot, all the tulips there and the ones actually in my side yard were planted by my next door neigh-

bor, John, who passed away quite young of a brain tumor just in February and so—watching the good ones die while these motherfuckers keep kicking has been kind of bleak. It's been great to see the tulips come up, but without my beloved friend.

Toby: If gardening is a ten year project, then it has the capacity to outlive you.

Sara: Absolutely, like poetry.

Toby: You are the author of an effect that you may not live to see come to pass.

Sara: I think that's true of all of history and thank God we don't have to live through all of it.

Toby: I agree. I really do. It's the best thing about being mortal. You only have to endure so much history.

Acknowledgements

Public Papers—the exhibit which this chapbook documents—was exhibited at the Lookout Gallery in East Lansing, Michigan and Public Space One, in Iowa City, Iowa, in the Fall of 2026. Huge thanks to the curators who made these exhibits possible, especially Steve Baibak and Laura Moser.

My gratitude to the many people who helped this project along the way: Paige Wilkinson for making the paper, Margaret Yapp for printing the poems, Jonathan Gharrie and Alicia Wright for hosting me in Iowa, Lauren Haldemen, Bruna Dantas Lobato and Felipe Guz Tinoco, and Sara Wainscott for letting me bury my poems in their yards; Marcus Fields for holding my hand through some last minute printing; Emily, for everything.

“You handle dust going to a long country” is a line from Carl Sandburg’s “To Certain Journeymen.” The singer who I quote throughout is Silvana Estrada. In “Unburying,” I quote from Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *The Serviceberry* and two songs by Iris DeMent, “Let the Mystery Be” and “Mama’s Opry.”

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This text is not whole on its own—it emerges from and extends the project of *Jewel Box* (Essay Press, 2026), a book-length study of the architect Louis Sullivan. Lewis Mumford describes Sullivan as “the first architect in America to come to know himself with any fullness in relation to his soil, period, and civilization.” He means that Sullivan was the first architect to call for a distinctly American architecture, free of European models—which he consistently calls in his theoretical writings an “Indigenous” or a “Native” architecture. An Indigenous architecture. Built by white architects. On stolen land. A circumstance which Sullivan fails—refuses—to acknowledge. Sullivan’s architecture and his architectural theory thus rest on a mystification of the conditions under which his work became possible, a failure to know in “any fullness” his “relation to his soil, period, and civilization.”

What would it mean to actually know one’s “relation to his soil, period,

and civilization” in “any fullness”? It would begin by being very frank about the material history under which I work—what Faith Spotted Eagle calls “freedom from denial.” In *Jewel Box*—and, in particular, in “Public Papers,” a series of erasure poems and lyric essays that are braided through the book—I try to practice “freedom from denial,” describing the specific historical violence that opened the land for Sullivan’s architectural innovations. Next, it would involve inviting the land to participate actively in the work. Instead of treating the land as an object—something that you own—treat it as an active and living agent, which can produce its own kind of knowledge: of history, of violence, and of poetry.

I do not think that poetry can repair the violence of settler genocide—on the contrary, my work has the same material relationship to it as Sullivan’s: I work in the same spaces that he did, in the wake of the same violence. But I do think that poetry can open alternate modes of relation—between language, history, and land. This project embodies that spirit.

So I went to Iowa and Chicago and I buried my poems there, as close as I could get to Sullivan’s structures. And I left them there for the summer, so that the land could read and respond to my work. Once I put my poems in the ground, I gave up control over them—what and how they mean. This is evidently a small gesture. All around me, as I drove, I saw dispossession and destruction. The prairies are gone, and instead of their endlessness, one encounters corn and soy, highways and poisoned rivers, university towns where the poets wander around making their little songs. The scale of devastation is unintelligible. Because it is the world itself. If the poem enters and changes that world, it does so in small and local ways—the smallest. It is not enough.