

Ordinary Disturbances: A Collection of Poetry

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## Abstract

### Ordinary Disturbances: A Collection of Poetry

Madelaine Caritas Longman

For my thesis I have crafted a collection of poetry exploring concepts of selfhood. The poems use various lenses to present diverse perspectives on this concept, such as psychology, psychoanalysis, and religious theories regarding the difference between thought and action. I also draw upon biographical information about the poet Fernando Pessoa and the visual artist Yayoi Kusama and their respective selflessness and narcissism, and explore how these perspectives influence the relationship between their art and their lives. The collection is held together by a loose first-person narrative, ranging from lyrical to experimental in style, about a young woman unsure how to balance an individual identity with the desire to be close to others.

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I feel like I was dropped into the middle of my personality years ago & I've been trying to get to the edge ever since....is this the edge?

-Carrie Fisher

alone in hotels

this room could be anyone  
cream walls, the smell of vacuumed carpet

you turn to a window  
so clean  
    it isn't a window

and when you reach to touch the night's cold air  
    its blackness meets your palm on the glass

when you lower your hand  
    the condensation remains  
superimposed on skyline and highways  
    as you turn away

the washroom is wide and white  
    cubicle basin, tall mirrors

    you wash the smoke from your hair

then swaddle yourself  
    in towels as soft  
    as no touch at all. then let them fall.

unfold your body  
    into white sheets  
    into dark

    blue shadows drift through you  
    a dream with no narrative  
a child's crayon drawing  
    shapes and colours inside you  
not quite contained by your skin

you drift towards yourself  
    alone and slowly

not so much waking  
    as realizing

you are awake

room without walls

a woman stands beside an unfinished chair

raw plywood                      hammer in hand

cells of light line the curtains

opening            into white space

the walls undreamed

she holds her body like it is no enemy

and looks into me

i want this:

eyes like the sun

tremble of nerves in the present

how she changes

the room

like light

but my eyelids unshutter

breath heavy as water

my heart beats its wings, batlike and trapped

as i gasp

back into myself

the poem of her presence

shreds



its full moment folds  
of cotton to shoulders  
the fabric of her jeans  
the silence that said  
everything is here  
a room without walls  
i don't know if she was someone i loved  
or someone i was  
the way in a dream everyone  
is someone else

## Snowglobe

When we return for the winter, the furniture has shrunk.  
Walls tightened. The ceiling nearly grazes our heads.

On the dresser stands a souvenir of yellowing plastic.  
In its globe a photograph, faces sun-bleached to stains.  
We are off-white and eyeless, surrounded  
by the plastic weather, bricked into  
a house swathed in pine.

We wanted to shatter this:  
the glass sky behind frozen windows.  
Our ears blunted by bathwater.  
No shout ever the right note  
to shatter the window,  
make a neighbor call the cops.

This is the only time we are friends.  
In each others' bedrooms, comparing  
the crescents our fingernails bite into our palms.

We spit every prayer and cuss we know,  
lob them at our pillows, astronaut blankets,  
let the sound be swallowed.

You told me you rocked on your knees, whispered  
to the air until you stopped believing in G-d,  
then went to bed. But to me, it doesn't feel  
like a contradiction: that something could be  
both uncaring and omnipotent.

In another room, we are hoping  
the dishes will shatter  
in too many pieces  
to pick up off the floor.  
We want glass in our heels,  
a trickle of heat, flicker of blood  
when we walk out into  
the sun-blank snow.

On the dresser,  
this small world  
closes us in.  
The large figures and the two small figures  
who could be us, who could be anyone.

## Accumulation of Light in Eyelids

I can never confess enough to come clean. My tongue traces the stitches of what can be spoken. I become a joke stretched to shaking, jab my nails into self-deprecation long after the laughter has stopped. I hold down speech like cheap red wine, throat acidic with words I can't remember if I've spilled. Once everyone's left, I still feel their eyes unpick me at the seams. Bolting the door, I walk like walking is sleep. Unable to lie still in the socket where a thought used to be.

If the past is an essay, I have erased, worn holes in the pages. I have worn selves collapsed dimensionless. Hit refresh on a Facebook page, forgetting the face looking back is my own. I've bleached my hair to the roots. I watch the window drift across the room and pretend this is new. The same moon shivering above the unmade bed. I boil to the surface, skin slick with fever, and sweat myself out.

I don't want to be an earthquake. Okay, once. I pushed the wrong side of sunrise, streetlights sharpened into slaps. Sucked it into my hungry skin like shadows on the moon. I broke wavelike and windows, smashed screens of cell phones, split my surface with need. Never certain whether I was victim or catastrophe. Never certain how to trace my way to the space between.

In insomniac night, the accumulations. All the times I tried to say something about love, and it came out as *thanks for putting up with me*. Or, *i was devastated because you left to buy groceries*. There is such a thing as too much hunger. I feel too big for me.

How can you ask a question that you live inside?

I glue a self together with to-do lists and apologies, as if guilt could be enough reason to exist. I seek contact but flinch when I'm touched.

*i will say something inappropriately sad, then shake with laughter to balance out the mood. i will get drunk enough to tell you everything and still take it back in the morning.*

Some nights I stay up until I see something move inside my skin. Trying to place myself in this body,

this paper shape, a holding cell for strangers  
who speak in my voice. In a journal, I scribble divisions  
between past and future, present and dream, thought  
and touch. I try to sketch a map to human.  
To five year plans and favourite TV shows.  
Something to offer.  
Something to hold.

Shower. I pull the colour from my hair. The water runs green  
then bleeds back to transparent. I scrub the scabs off new skin  
then step out, shaking in my sameness.

At the edge of the bed, I anchor myself to this coldness.  
The sound of rain. In a one-room apartment with a storm  
outside, I try to fill my body. I press my palm to the window  
and let the weather rattle.

## Interlude: Parking Lot

"You'll laugh about it someday." And I do. The picture of me,  
purple lipstick and a pirate hat, solemnly holding a lemon.  
On the backyard stairs, I sulk proud in my goth dress  
and pink feather boa, insist to my baffled father, 'It's for *art*.'  
Uncomprehending, he snaps the shutter, allows me to remain.

Leave me these snapshots. Leave me whisper-reading  
the Chapters' erotica section, my friends and I laughing,  
convinced we're the first to discover sex and its inelegance.  
The adrenaline hum when Jas shoplifts, our ears drumming,  
convinced we'll go to prison over *Italian Stallions*.

Leave me the weeklong relationship where we held hands once.  
Leave me the tremble of touching, of being wanted. Hair catching  
in our lipgloss. Leave me in the theater, pulling the loose thread  
from my best jacket, placing it on the bald head in the next row,  
convinced this is somehow impressive.

Leave me my black pants with the chains and zippers,  
my bracelet with tentacles. Leave me by the river with Brittany,  
crossing the bridge by Chinatown, not realizing  
we're in the wrong place, the place the cars go,  
that they're coming towards us. Leave us running, laughing,  
so we won't panic.

Leave me a mind not entirely overwritten  
with calorie counts and lethal dosages.  
Leave me somewhere other  
than purging in a KFC washroom  
and gargling the handsoap.  
Leave me something besides the time I gave my number  
to the man twice my age who asked on the train,  
because I was fifteen and too scared to lie.  
My parents that night, angry to cover up their fear.

Leave me the laughter before it turns mean.  
Before Meg from *Family Guy* swallows a bottle of pills  
and the soundtrack pauses to show it's a joke.  
Before *take out the garbage or I'll ask you*  
*how you got those scars*. Before the stomachaches  
are diagnosed as internal bleeding  
and the anxiety is diagnosed as anxiety.

Leave me standing behind the Chinook Centre parking lot  
at the top of a mountain of soot and snow,  
laughing with my friends beneath a sky of light pollution.  
Just leave me something. Some way to say,  
before my throat closes, *this is where I come from.*

green halo

i.

My childhood bedroom turns my tongue into a stone.

I lie down

inside the shame of weighing

down a body.

*Every girl feels this.* Mist-thin curtains.

Four blue-sky pillars hold me in place. Closet doors

papered with photography projects, monkey-bar snapshots, Yu-Gi-Oh.

Eighth grade graphites of riot grrrl icons, short haired, plausible  
as boy-crushes.

The ceiling stares into me. Dents in the wall from foot, forehead,  
hairbrush. Scars in my thighs, pink-shine either growth spurt  
or the broken skin filling back in. I've forgotten the argument  
except my own fingernails, and the hiss of bathwater  
curling into steam.

*Do not answer the telephone. If you do, never say you are alone.*

Water in my ears and an argument in the next room.

Someone laughs or cries on the other side.

I am learning a quieter version of disturbance.

i.

I carry myself like a stone, like a secret. I am learning to hold anger  
close — to my skin, through my skin. Invisible and blistering.

I edit my body, line-

break to hipbone, pour myself between mirrors, each angle a slash of me  
against me. Against facial twitch, against birds' nest hair, against a largeness  
I can't purge.

i.

But I had food, and usually, a quiet room  
in which to work. The highest mark  
on all four midterms. A tendency to yell  
and hit myself. Escape routes planned  
for these situations. The constant taste  
of nausea. A mouth that spoke too much  
or not at all. A place to sleep  
if not sleep itself.

*You'll laugh about it someday.*

i.

I held myself close as a missed meal, a line of broken skin.  
Wrote rhyming-couplet horror-movie fan-poetry until  
the guidance counselor called me in, lent me books,  
"issue novels" from the public library. I read them by flashlight,  
basement door cracked open for footsteps on the stairs.  
Clutched close these pages, their too-darkness,  
in order to see myself.

i.

So I wrote math tests and murder mysteries  
I never planned far enough to solve.  
So I wrote lists of the violent acts I'd directed towards myself  
then draped them in metaphors so I wouldn't be seen  
as asking for something. Then called them poems.

So I wrote scripts  
    for *The Young and the Restless*, crazy Sheila  
under the surgeon's knife to become another person  
    and steal her life. Crazy Sheila  
who looks in the mirror and sees her own face speak back to her  
    in another voice.

So I wrote love stories  
where every kiss was 'suddenly' and 'passionately'  
    and tasted like cigarettes  
and followed by an author's note, saying,  
    'this isn't supposed  
    to be beautiful'  
which I knew was a lie.

So I wrote girls kissing boys kissing girls  
    kissing boys kissing boys who look like girls  
    kissing girls kissing girls touching girls  
    women touching people touching  
    each other —

Then fade to black.

So I wrote my voice  
    into the scene



then cut myself out.

i.

Unexpectedly, I landed in adulthood, decided  
to live alone. One-room apartment, no kitchen,  
clothes fermenting on the floor. Fridge full of bruised fruit.  
My limbs stiffened with fear and anger,  
and no one to blame. Not even an unspeakable blame.

I caught fire at three a.m., convinced my skin was artificial.  
That I could peel reality, streetlights in the layered sky.  
Something behind the night glistened.

I carried it with me. My body / everything  
I wanted to leave.

i.

So I drank red wine and it wasn't enough. So I drank red bull  
and it wasn't enough. So I talked very quickly  
about food and travel and wanting to live  
everywhere and learn every language and once I'd done  
everything on earth, how I'd become an astronaut  
or astral projectionist —  
but talking didn't empty me.

So I slept for days, but silence didn't fill me.  
So I scrubbed my skin and pulled the dye from my roots  
but I was still left with myself. So I wrote emails  
to organizations for the desperate, and volunteers all named Jo  
said that sounds very hard  
and we are not authorized  
to give advice in these situations  
and please write again,  
anytime.

So I ate or didn't eat. So I slept or didn't sleep.  
'So tell me about yourself' was a test I couldn't pass  
and couldn't study for

and I wondered  
what I would want  
if I could want something.

i.

So I moved to a new city to learn, to live with roommates,  
to make a home in a life I could stand. I moved to a new city  
to burn holes in my lives, to miss the last metro home  
and walk until sunrise into downtown's glow.

Marie points to the clouds above the buildings.  
The sky is a grey-black haze, but in it  
a smear of green hangs over the city.  
She jokes that it's angels, or aliens, like something would come  
to rapture three drunk twenty-somethings,  
to carry us out  
of the monochrome night.  
A green circle shining in the grey.

It's light pollution, says Kristen, who has lived in Montreal  
all her life. From that building. The huge logo, too far  
to see what it's selling.

We walk towards it.

Long island iced tea sloshes  
with each stumbling step through the snow.  
My roommates make conversation,  
and I ignore them to prove  
they will not ask if I'm okay. They ask if I'm okay.  
I reach inside me for something to say.

[borderline: talk]

contents: hide

a complex and abstract term  
cannot be depicted by an image

move image  
to the text of the body<sup>1</sup>

[image description: a clear empty  
in various stages of healing]

positive affects: incongruous gratitude  
at perceived expressions of kindness

*illicit memory*

the mind dissolves  
to protect distances

*environment / triggers / action potential*  
the body's map of / itself

spatial coding

hippocampus (neuroplastic) (seahorse)  
may be stunted, affecting  
inhibition ~~memory~~<sup>2</sup> ~~space~~  
difficulty diverging from responses  
that have previously been taught

amygdala (almond)  
~~memory~~ ~~decision~~ ~~reaction~~  
social judgments regarding  
other peoples' faces

~~thought suppression~~

over a lifetime  
it is not uncommon  
to move in and out of the diagnosis

---

<sup>1</sup> may align with normal teenage behavior. not diagnosable under age eighteen  
unless symptoms have been present for one year

<sup>2</sup> note: some clients do not report any traumatic event

Ode to Pessoa

'I am nothing.  
I will never be anything.  
I cannot wish to be anything.  
Bar that, I have in me all the dreams of the world.'  
-Alvaro de Campos

'After I was born they locked me up inside me  
But I left'  
- Fernando Pessoa

\*

Quiet universe, many-tongued, you spun yourself  
out of yourself. Your own name turned orthonym,  
omnivorous. Fernando Pessoa. Though you wrote  
with your soul for ink, you are not in these letters.  
Though your body has stilled, you are not buried  
in the courtyard of Jerónimos Monastery.

*If what I write has any value, it is not I who am valuable.*  
Your life's work in twenty-five thousand disorganized pages.  
Would you hate that I sit here, writing these words by the snow-dark window,  
looking for you in what you left? Fervent person,  
soft-spoken and smoldering, liver scarred by cirrhosis.

Where have you hidden yourself?

\*

Soares:  
*A cup of coffee, a cigarette and my dreams  
can substitute quite well for the universe and its stars.*

If he is an aesthete in the religion of himself  
you are a mystic of selflessness  
thinking of absinthe rather than drinking it.  
The physical world reduced your grandest romance  
to a single hasty kiss in the office  
before returning to your work.

For all the politics your voices personified,  
your earthly heart remained a radical inactivist.

Campos:

*Life always pained me, it was always too little.*

Fernando Pessoa, soft-spoken, heavy-lidded,  
who saw the world without leaving Lisbon.  
Theosophist, philosopher, physician, navigator,  
translating yourself across continents.

Fernando Pessoa, behind your black hat and the glitter of your spectacles,  
I still see a schoolboy writing letters to his alter-egos. Writing back.  
Fernando Pessoa, quiet child, who saw the world  
as a great book opened to him  
in a language he could not parse.

Always doubting the solidity  
of that space that men agreed  
to call a heart.

\*

But what a gift to channel Caeiro's  
ordinary ecstasy.

To see flowers and trees and hills  
and only see flowers and trees and hills.

Your self only  
a part of the landscape.

I have no way to know if you meant it,  
but I know he did, when he wrote:

*merely to hear the wind blow  
makes it worth having been born*

Fernando Pessoa,  
as you floated through your expanding universe  
I hope you never ran out of new stars to read.

The snow through the windowpane  
drifts down to the sill

and snow

touches snow

\*

I think of you in the mountains and fields,  
brushing through the dark grass.

You travel so lightly  
because you carry nothing  
not even yourself.

## Tomatoes and Vinegar

Balsamic soaks the bread,  
                  bright dark through olive oil.  
Cucumbers crunch in their thin skins.

We're home: this is ours,  
                  belonging if not owning.

Burble of conversational catch-up,  
                  the hours between us and back again.  
Burble of coffee in the pot  
                  waiting to refill our mugs.

Sugar and air, these substances our cells  
                  have built into bodies.  
The spaces we fill  
                  with what we've found.

                  This place we've made:  
animal hair, and storms that shake our windows,  
                  scuffed hardwood, and dishes always to be done  
and days  
                  that don't stop

                  but sometimes slow  
until we can almost hold,  
                  across years and time zones,

this taste of sunlight and rain.  
This talk like breath.

## Iatrogenesis

A personality disorder is, by definition, an inflexible pattern of thought and behavior that must remain stable across time and in various situations. If the disorder consists of instability the instability must remain stable. That is to say, continue to be unstable across time and in various situations.

A person with a borderline personality feels almost everything. Though a person without a borderline personality may also feel like they feel almost everything, in comparison they feel almost nothing. A person with a borderline personality may think they feel nothing, but the feeling of feeling nothing is in fact something that they are feeling deeply. They are overwhelmed by the feeling even if it is a feeling of feeling nothing.

The unstable, fragmented, or lack of identity must remain stable across time and situation by remaining unstable, fragmented, or lacking across time and situation. Due to frantic search for identity, one may adopt the identity of a borderline personality. That is to say, one may adopt the identity of unstable, fragmented, or lacking identity. It is difficult to discern the difference between a person who truly lacks identity and a person who has merely adopted this identity of lack.

It is difficult to discern the difference between what a person feels and what a person believes they feel. Many people believe they have borderline personalities and that they are feeling almost everything. They do not realize that almost every person feels almost everything, but there are different degrees of feeling everything. Some everythings are almost nothings. Some nothings may comparatively be everything. We must assume that in most people, this inconsistency is less constant, and therefore not an illness.

Rejecting the diagnosis of a borderline personality is one indication of a borderline personality. However, if one too readily adopts the identity of a borderline personality, a practitioner should be wary, though this may also be a symptom of the illness. There is no cure for the illness. Therefore, those who appear to recover do not meet and have never met the criteria for an illness which must remain stable across time and situation. However, the appearance of recovery may also be a symptom of instability.

Therefore, if one appears to recover, this recovery is either evidence of continuing illness, or evidence that there has never been an illness.



## Alexithymia

“For over 50 years immunologists have based their thoughts, experiments, and clinical treatments on the idea that the immune system functions by making a distinction between self and nonself. Although this paradigm has often served us well, years of detailed examination have revealed a number of inherent problems. This Viewpoint outlines a model of immunity based on the idea that the immune system is more concerned with entities that do damage than with those that are foreign.”

-Polly Matzinger, “The Danger Model: A Renewed Sense of Self”

“To begin, you must believe in a future.”

-Louise Glück, "Disruption, Hesitation, Silence"

i.

Alexithymia, from the Greek

lexis : speech

thumos : soul, the seat of emotion, feeling, thought

a : a negation

i.

To exist requires an immense degree of energy.

Do you permit yourself to exist?

It's not just a yes or no question. There has to be a how.

The body is not detachable. What cannot be excreted is shaped into tissue.

A soft spot on the intestine, shoulder blades that curdle when touched.

In the morning, trees of red light sink into the membranes

of my eyelids: a slow choking

waking to become

a being with a will.

i.

First friend, I love you and we are so tired.

Your smell of sweat and cinnamon, threadbare

softness of your coat and posture woven

against the wind. The snow blows one way,

black sky another.

I glow like a pharmacy, trying to tell you—  
something. Years expand between us.

Factory work soaks your clothes,  
stitches stones to your gestures

when your hands try to talk. Eyes quieted.  
We fill our mouths with dollar store chocolate,

pour smoke from our mouths  
across unbroken snow. White light spills out of us.

Call it a soul, this empty space  
catching the Christmas lights.

i.

"I don't really care what happens  
to my body," you say as we jaywalk  
across Calgary December.

I joke about ascension,  
shoulder blades                    opening  
    to a bleach of wings.

A holiness so devastating  
it has to be ironic.

In my mind I peel my skin like an orange,  
looking for something inside. A core split  
into segments. We cross the street laughing.  
Snow falls on snow. Our footprints go blank.

i.

At eighteen I developed an autoimmune disease,  
though I say an autoimmune disorder,  
a word that sounds cleaner,  
less permanent. Something misplaced  
rather than lost.

    My body ceased  
to recognize itself. White blood cells targeting  
intestinal tissue. Mistaking my self for intruder.

I sharpened my bones on the absence,  
cut out oranges, meat, oil, spices. Polite conversation  
prefers membranes intact, insides to remain

internal. It is difficult to be pretty on the inside.

I say I am better now.

"Does it hurt?" asks the doctor, as he moves his hands across different parts of my abdomen. I don't know how to answer. He looks at my face.

i.

The inability to express anger  
may be read as contentment.  
The self forms in/around  
a negation. Personality compressed  
to a single paper sheet.  
Handed over. In high school  
we said we did not care  
about politics, rolling tights  
over knife bites. At fourteen  
I kept a rock beside my bed,  
a smooth fistful to smash  
against my arms. I don't know why.  
I am lying when I say  
I don't know why.  
It calmed me down.

That's it.

i.

At fourteen I crumpled  
amongst junior high toilets,  
writing "fuck" on the walls.  
Hardly original,  
yet a poem in its pressure.

i.

I know there must be more  
to a life than hostility  
but what I remember  
    is always  
that panicked rush of air spilling  
inside, out of me  
    running in the snow  
until nausea knocked me down.

That fear to sleep, fear of dreams,  
endings, waking.

That self pearling out from my throat  
and hovering.

i.

Is the self inside the body  
or is it the body  
or can it leave?

Seeking an end to metaphor  
I use my body to send messages  
to myself.

Marks on the skin  
or under. A way to calibrate,  
authenticate emotion. To record time  
as an itch, new skin  
pushing forth.

To force my body's attention  
or erasure.

i.

I changed schools. I changed schools again.  
I made friends  
    who did not step away  
when we were seen together.  
Aspiring artists, which mostly meant  
wearing black, making sex jokes, staying up all night  
drunk on the front lawn, certain the fire truck  
was going to arrest us. We burned Barbie's hair  
for art class, glued jellybeans and glitter to our faces,  
always arrived late and mostly-always laughing.

We saw the marks  
on each others' bodies, but didn't  
know what to say.

i.

We swung from monkey bars as frost bit  
our palms in the dark, sharp as stars.

Shining with heat in our thin jackets,  
we lay on our backs on the ice  
and finally spoke  
    of how we wanted to die  
by which we meant  
    how urgently our hunger  
for a world we could live in.

i.

I read that certain illnesses  
may be the body's way  
of insisting on care.

That the pain  
is a survival mechanism,  
a way for the body  
to speak: I am here.  
We are one another.

i.

To this day I wound easily  
at YouTube comments,  
movie reviews, ambiguous eye contact.  
All of it saying, another spoiled  
millennial, attention-glutton and  
false. It is like losing  
a layer of skin  
though only the first layer.

I look for these ruptures.  
How does one know a boundary  
if one does not test it?

i.

My roommate told me I would know  
if I had been in love, the same way I would know  
if I was having a panic attack.

What I know: sometimes I flood with need  
to escape      this body. That I bend at first,

easily, to the space of another will,  
then curl away, resentful  
of my absence. Who put it there.

i.

I fall  
into the back of the taxi, laughing and crying quietly  
so as not to disturb the driver. I ask Marie to promise  
to take away the bottles of medication, put them in her room  
when we get home. She promises. And then I'm in the house saying

that this isn't really happening, and that I'm acting and I'm asking  
for attention and  
I'm sorry.

She brings glasses of water,  
their surfaces trembling.  
Her voice in splinters, saying,  
"Who cares if you want attention! Everyone  
wants attention! It's part of being a person!"

When I wake up she's still here  
and I'm still here.

i.

Is there a difference between a personality and an imitation  
of a personality? I want to be honest, but I see the wires. There's no polite word  
for immense hunger, so I leave that out, the motivation. Polish the absence  
into something academic. Malleable, a sculpture of potential.  
How it collapses. How it shines.

When I meet another

person like me, the space between us  
thins and quiets. Two mirrors reflecting an infinity  
of selves

until someone moves.

## Other People

Tonight I graduate. Ninth grade. I fight with my mom  
about acceptable haircuts, clip my fringe with nail-scissors,  
flush the loose strands down the toilet. I can't gather them all;  
evidence sticks to my socks as I step out of the washroom.

I wear my best dress, turquoise-flowered, falling crooked  
with my crooked steps. The receptionist still mistakes me for a boy,  
but I kind of like it, this body of being  
more than one thing.

The dark grass. Cool against my ankles.

My classmates lie on their backs, touching head to head.  
Their legs and arms radiate like points of an asterisk.  
It's strange to see them, other people, my classmates  
lying still and quiet and unironic. No one getting hurt.  
A boy wears a dress shirt the colour of sky.  
He must have taken time to get ready. Taken thought.  
It's strange to see them: other people  
filling up their other lives.

## Insomnia

Thoughts cannot hurt you. When flies settle on the ceiling,  
don't listen to the fever of their wings. Honesty  
does not have to be a knife.

When you check your reflection, use the window. A sheet  
of glass and silver won't show you as you are. Look to stars  
and smog, swaying hands of trees, traffic burning green  
against the night. The age of sky above shell-grey streets.

Trace the shape of your hand to remember you are not a bird.  
Your bones are not empty. When the beat of carbon and marrow  
moves in your limbs, listen. Walk yourself loose  
from steel bands of a fracture. You can't seem to hold  
your ribs closed, but your chest does not break. The air  
is not the color of a migraine. Smudge the list off the back  
of your hand, the cracked ink of unfinished tasks.

Birds are not calling out your failure. They are calling  
each other home.



## Elegy for Lawrence Hong

i.

The language I am inventing right now  
can only be spoken at sunrise, alone  
in kitchens of houses where everyone else is asleep.  
In this language, *Hong* is the sound of a slow bronze bell  
large enough for a person to hide inside.  
*Hong* is a sound that is heavy, yet light enough  
for the air to carry and pass,  
molecule to molecule across the city.

When the vibrations touch the base of a tree,  
they are absorbed through the roots. They grow  
into heartwood, leave their shapes in the rings.  
If the pine- and birch- and willow-bark is stripped,  
and the trees cut into cross-sections,  
the disks can be played as records.

They sound like the spokes of your bicycle  
spinning in the background as you laugh  
at something we can't hear. The records disintegrate  
after one use. So we let the trees grow, and trust  
your voice is in them.

In this language, *Lawrence* means both friend and the feeling  
when the palm of a hand touches very soft grass and is welcomed  
into spring.

ii.

The internet is full  
of all the pictures your mother has ever taken of you.  
You grin beside your best friend in his profile pictures  
— so many of them. Like he was preparing to lose you  
or never thought he would.  
You're in kitchens and restaurants,  
parades and living rooms,  
sunglasses and bathing suits and inside jokes.

You're at parties I never went to  
because there would always be  
another time.

And the internet is full of court battles. To release  
the marks on your body. The murder weapon.  
How a person can wield himself  
against another person  
and break him.

The internet wants your body  
like a plot device in a crime show  
or a story in which  
there are answers

Waiting for the metro five time zones away  
your killer's face shines down from a television.  
No one should have to say  
"your killer's face."  
He has a name, but I would rather  
remember yours.

The city planning you studied. You showing  
how a space is made  
by being in it.

I will say your name  
and hold it. Let it breathe in sunrise  
and between the small raindrops  
and between the heavy raindrops  
and in the space that holds us.

Let the sound of your name  
be continuous, and let it mean  
the opposite of violence.

You're here.

You're still here.

Kusama's Self-Obliteration (Jud Yalkut, 1967)

0.

open to an overlap of dots and lights.  
static groans through guitar  
                                and piano strings,  
slides of cells or paint splotches,  
                                eaten by light.  
in the white space, unease ripples      out of the screen.

i.

somewhere, the pattern becomes hide.  
an animal lies in the grass, its body too close  
                                to recognize  
Kusama (her hands veined like leaves)  
                                touches white circles to the form,  
                                which at first is not moving  
                                and appears to be dead  
  but then stands up  
  into a horse.

Kusama presses white circles to her red gown.  
                                when she mounts the horse, they are one white-dotted creature  
  moving through the woods.

the dots shine like sun through leaves.  
the dots shine like stains on film.

the horse dips its head  
                                to chew the long grass  
  at the water's edge.  
the horse dips its head to sip from the dark water  
                                which is also covered in polka dots.

  a figure who may be Kusama  
  walks into the water  
                                arms out, her body a cross draped in fabric  
  floating white ripples in the black waves.

she polka dots the lily pads.  
she polka dots a canvas floating on the water  
urgent perfect circles carried off with the waves.  
she paints the water                      colour swallowed by its size

until her brush's primary mark is not pigment but ripple.

a frog leaps  
scattering droplets.

Kusama polka dots a tree.  
her body is missing frames  
the absence of movement  
between each movement.  
she moves like a ghost or spirit  
something almost, but not quite, natural

Kusama lays oak leaves down the back of a resting cat.  
Kusama lays oak leaves down the spine of a person  
who lies flat and nude on the soft, damp earth.

the figure stands.  
she crowns him in leaves.  
she buries him in leaves.

the cat slinks off, glowing with polka dots

disappears into the trees

ii.

suddenly, skyscrapers, urban glow  
faces honeycombed by shadow

the bodies sip the light  
the bodies blur into each other

there is paint and there are ears of corn  
there are cellular fractals. there is light shifting  
through water onto skin / sand / anemones

there are foods and flowers, humans dressing/undressing in the half-dark

clothing or cells or artwork

androgynous and overlapped

people painting each other, primary colours  
soaking skin and fabric

there are dots. there are branches. the veins of humans and plants.

there are membranes  
the space between them  
collapsed.

iii.

Kusama eats something.  
she does something to the floor  
to create light.  
naked bodies overlaying each other.

someone is dancing  
or standing in the light  
that dances over them.

iv.

people fuck covered in paint.  
there is affection or violence, bodies crashing  
into bodies  
joy or fear, hard touch,  
paint like mud.

there is too much to watch.  
the soundtrack vibrates  
thin needles  
through my skin.  
crowded like a train.  
how do we touch  
without hurting  
and why.  
how do we move  
through each other.

I want to believe  
this can be gentle.

\*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> zoom out to the polka dot  
of a planet or a cell

after watching *Trainspotting*

I feel different from everyone around me,  
I tell you in the dark, under the covers. Your arms  
curve around my chest and stomach, holding me  
inside myself.

Well, not everyone. Ninety-five percent.

I think a lot of people feel that way.

Yeah. That's probably true.

I don't say: the other five percent upset me.  
It's like theft. Like we're auditioning  
for the same role  
and I haven't had time to practice.

I'm scared, I keep saying.

Why, you keep asking.

I don't know. School.

I don't say: because I slept fourteen hours  
and expect to do the same tonight.  
Because I think I'm becoming  
a person who sleeps all day,  
then stumbles through the house, clunking  
like an argument.

Like when we watched that documentary  
on Rudy Giuliani. How they tried to say  
he did some good things. That he got drugs off the street.

And I got mad, said the drugs were a side-effect, that he hated  
the homeless, the gay clubs, the mentally ill, wanted us swept  
out of sight. Chased us out, locked us up, left the emptiness  
behind.

And then I'm talking about emptiness again.  
How it bonds easily, how it's like, what's it called  
the one that's not a noble gas. The kind that needs electrons,  
fixes itself to whatever it can get. If it's not drugs, it's housework,  
or sex, or food, or starvation,  
or academia, or the stock market, or, or, or, etcetera.

You know. I know.  
This is not a conversation  
we need to be having.

It's just...

I'm not sure what the alternative is.

Not when moderation brings me back  
to that sleep-drunk zombie stumble,  
that month I thought I could make myself love him  
if I just paid less attention  
to how I felt.

It will be okay, you say. I used to feel that way. Talk it over  
with your therapist. See what she says.

I feel different from everyone around me, I say, again.

You won't always, you say, again.

We're different people.

Is that bad?

No.

We hold each other as sleep covers us.  
I don't want to be here, but I don't want to be  
anywhere else, either,  
and I want to be with you  
even if that means being me.

You're gone by the time I wake up  
at noon, mouth grainy,  
bitter with medicinal sleep.

The day is bright and heavy.  
The dog needs to be walked.

## Study in Religion

According to my religious studies teacher,  
if a Daoist sees a person drowning,  
they believe the right thing to do  
is leave them be.

The religious studies teacher who said this was not Daoist.  
I do not know any Daoists to corroborate or contradict this claim.

A Google search of "Daoism and saving a life"  
brings up a book by Zhuang Zi, who writes,  
"Martyrs are praised for their righteousness, but cannot save  
their own lives. I do not know if the righteousness  
is true righteousness or not."

A search of "Daoism and drowning"  
says that in Daoist cultures, swimming  
is believed to be dangerous.



## Narcissus Sea

“My big job is to glimpse my vision. We were born on earth. After all, well... moon is a polka-dot, sun is a polka-dot, and then, the earth where we live on is also a polka dot.”  
- Yayoi Kusama interviewed on Louisiana Channel

You come to make a name for yourself.  
Burn the animal-glue of your adolescent paintings  
and cross the sea  
    from Matsumoto to Manhattan.

Live alone in an apartment, cluttered  
with neurosis and ambition. Soft sculptures of  
phalli and food. The remarkable scale  
    of your fear.

Macaroni crunches underfoot  
in your installations. Pasta  
    consumes shoes and mannequins,  
while phalli accumulate on armchairs and rowboats.  
This physical world terrifies you, and you take it in,  
reflect it back           a thousandfold.  
Hang it on the walls,           fill rooms  
with your terror, and invite us in  
to look.

    Despair's another artwork,  
larger than your life. You survive yourself.  
It's more material,  
    though you sleep all day  
    though your hands shake  
    though it's constant tension  
                            between swallowing the world  
    and being swallowed. If everything is art, why separate  
the work from the creator? If everything is art, why bother  
with artistry?

    Then the dots come.  
You see the world, a pale blue polka dot  
in a net of infinity. The ceiling's molecules  
    spin unrestrainedly,  
and your skin is only cells.

You are a pattern on the earth,

which is a pattern in a starscape  
a world in a dewdrop

For better or for worse,  
you are,

and being  
is all there is.

So you paint.  
Infinity nets, each in two colours.  
You stand on a ladder  
to reach the scale of your vision.  
Painting dots on the skin of beautiful hippies,  
painting your name with a flourish  
over all you do.

A polka dot priestess.  
You proselytise ego death  
then sign your name.  
*Kusama's Self-Obliteration.*  
*Kusama's Peep Show,*  
those mirrored boxes  
filled with coloured lights, water, and darkness,  
self-contained galaxies where we cannot step  
but merely see our own eyes  
looking in.

Polka dots swallow food, dresses, assistants,  
sex, politics, the kitchen table:  
*I'm here but nothing.* Sofas and teapots, the books in their cases,  
water in its glass. The TV and microwave  
sleeping in the dark. All obliterated  
into blacklight, into specks. This visible world  
which we are not in

or no more present in  
than anything else.

*(Thoughts of a Fish  
in the Deep Sea  
bubbling silver  
to fill the room)*

You paint. The space you work in  
swells with eyes and colour,

meticulous as biological cells.

In Korea, your dogs open their mouths  
to bark, *Hello Anyang with Love*.  
Their mouths open into polka dots.

You lie down, a part of the *Red Horizon*.

You invite us in to the darkened mirror  
to step out of ourselves and dissolve  
into light.

We touch the edge  
of your hallucination. Where the dream  
is made real

and there is no line  
between total control  
and total surrender.

Eighty-seven years old.  
Five decades  
of self-obliteration

and you are still here.

fullness

Hand over hand, water runs warmth across our fingers  
as we scrub away the day's soup and butter, salt and sweet  
still ringing in our mouths.

I kiss your neck.  
The kitchen window deepens  
our summer into gold

Light, dragonfly-winged,  
ornaments the rusted rail of our balcony,  
where we ate cookies dark with cocoa  
and chipped with white chocolate,  
and drank the deep sunlight of oranges .

You reminded me how to recognize low blood sugar,  
stroked my hand until black sparks left my vision  
and sky and cityline returned  
and the deep green grass.

We hold each other like light

Again and again, I slip into myself  
unafraid .

Speech trips my tongue,  
an unpracticed instrument  
whose song I long to share  
with you.

You brush the spices  
from your countertop,  
turmeric raining  
past your palms,

clear drops through our fingers.

The room fills with evening, white walls  
gone to gallery of shadows:  
indigo. shale. lilac. plum.

We take the night  
into our mouths  
softskinned  
open

five haiku

abandoned canoe  
new leaves opening  
in the dirt on the hull

airplane sunset  
one bare star  
above black clouds

the window's white page  
a black squirrel  
punctuation

blue light on the snow  
balanced on a dangling branch  
of red berries

sunrise breaking  
a crow drips  
from the rooftop

## Narcissus Garden

“In the summer of 1966, the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama installed Narcissus Garden in the main grounds of the 33rd Venice Biennale. Fifteen hundred mirrored plastic balls formed the core of a dynamic, complex work, which also included human agents, environmentally determined, ephemeral elements, and photographic images. The common thread, however, was the presence of the artist herself, captured for posterity in nearly every existing photograph of *Narcissus Garden*.”

-Martin R. Sullivan, "Reflective Acts and Mirrored Images: Yayoi Kusama's *Narcissus Garden*"

1966. At the 33rd Venice Biennale, Yayoi Kusama,  
transplanted from Manhattan, transplanted from Matsumoto,  
arrives uninvited and representing  
no country.

She plants fifteen-hundred mirrored orbs across the lawn  
lightweight plastic the size and shape of crystal balls.  
They lie in the shade of the banyan trees  
and reflect clouds and bright sky  
Kusama standing in their center  
and everyone who walks by.

NARCISSUS GARDEN, KUSAMA.  
YOUR NARCISSIUM FOR SALE. \$2

She wears a kimono the colour of metal,  
gold fabric, silver sash.  
The mirrors bubble around her  
as though she's emerged from another element:  
Narcissus rising to break the surface of the pool  
where he drowned inside himself.

Kusama holds out the mirror, offers a chance  
to hold our shifting reflections.

In the photos that remain,  
Kusama has posed herself  
anticipated our gaze.  
Across fifty years,

she invites us to enter  
the garden,  
immerse ourselves  
in her/our narcissism  
fragmented and mingling  
composition altered with every movement

Kusama places herself in every photograph.  
She plays with her narcissism. Spins it and tosses it,  
lays down in the pool. Centers herself in the frame  
and stares back at the viewer.  
Her body material.  
Our gaze material.

She tosses her narcissism into the air.  
Three globes float suspended in a photograph  
women watching in the garden  
beneath the banyan tree. The blond woman's hand  
frozen, reaching.

Kusama's narcissism takes in clouds and branches,  
herself and everyone who sees her  
and everyone she sees

She smiles, shows teeth  
and eye-curve as she shakes hands  
to make a sale, or at least to be seen.

Kusama is small beside the woman,  
small beneath the trees.  
She looks happy to be noticed.

When security chases Kusama away  
— not an artist, a pedlar —  
the mirrors remain.

Across years, they resurface, gleaming  
like bubbles of air  
under water.

In New Canaan and Queensland.  
In Central Park and The Louvre. The Internet.  
*The New Yorker*. Selfies and collectors' cases

and light-damaged photographs.

She tosses the mirror and it hangs, spinning in the space  
above her open arms.

We look in on ourselves looking in.



five senryu

a clear winter night  
between branches, watching stars —  
this strange homesickness

shadows on the moon  
the spaces I occupy  
but do not fill

white earth and white air  
the unbroken snow  
erasing our footsteps

last day of the year:  
in the morning light, washing  
the smoke from my hair

the old woman's hands  
    water sounds  
from the koto strings

## Performance Piece

Some critics believe Kusama to be performing her mental illness. While this is undoubtedly true, they equate performance with artificiality. According to their theories, her choice to live and work in a psychiatric hospital reflects her desire for publicity, rather than safety. Though Kusama claims to have experienced hallucinations since childhood, critics point out inconsistencies; how she never mentioned these experiences until after meeting with American psychiatrists. They argue Kusama has never valued privacy. That she has constructed galleries to her obsessions, to phalli and food, arranged to be photographed nude with her fear.

These critics do not wholly dislike Kusama. They argue that the lens of illness obscures the depth of her work. The theories of mirrors and water, of the image returning fractured and infinite. They argue this thoughtfulness cannot be an illness. That her work stems from structure rather than decay. That illness cannot describe calculation.

Dots saturate her childhood paintings, as they later do her obliterations. In one, a woman stands in a snowstorm. The snow scatters into polka dots. Her face scatters into polka dots. The nets appear later, though some early paintings appear to have been reworked to include them.

When she left Matsumoto, Kusama destroyed most of her early paintings. This is common practice for artists for whom imperfections threaten biographic myth.

These critics concede she has suffered from obsessions, anxiety, insomnia, suicidal ideation and attempts, an overbearing family and an all-consuming work ethic. Her position as outsider and supposed narcissism as a Japanese woman who named herself repeatedly in her pieces.

Kusama made performance of her walks down the street, her tensions with living, her flights from security guards. She took down the glass between living and art. When she touched the brush to the hallucination, it became reality.

six senryu

our kitchen table  
a sprig of jasmine  
in a pill bottle

September embrace  
finding each other  
inside our coats

dark grass  
our one shadow  
waving

last bus  
the moon on the river  
walks with me

first argument  
the space at my back  
is cold

mourning  
the dog drops his toys  
at my feet

new grass in January  
our dog is impatient  
when I stop to look

this is one of those moods

where a shirt hung over a kitchen chair  
catches light in its stains  
and you want to remember this  
the way a camera can't

in another room in the same building  
someone practices guitar  
hands unsteady

thin walls  
hold the pause

after  
you're left with not much  
but not nothing

## Intersection

My neighbour wears a suit under his raincoat  
as he walks to the synagogue.

I wear a hoodie, sweatpants,  
the damp silver air. I haven't showered,  
but rain drips from the pine trees  
and washes my hair. I know  
the scientific name for sparrows,  
but I don't remember what I did this morning.  
These months I can't read autobiographies;  
the first person is a paper cup barrier,  
leaking.

My mind looks for faces  
in shadows and machines;  
accidents of light and wires  
bend into what I can recognize.  
A bottlecap glimmers in the pebbles.  
Yesterday I spilled salad on the floor  
and spent several minutes debating  
whether this was art.

I remember everything I ate two summers ago.  
I remember where I was, but not why  
or who was there. Laughter twitches,  
a muscle memory  
which used to hold touch.  
An echo of a name  
where there is only wind.

The sidewalks by the lilac tree  
ache with thoughts of green.  
The bottlecaps glitter. I walk  
with no destination. It feels a trespass;  
the cough of wings in my chest.

My neighbour says something  
I don't understand, and I say something  
I don't remember.

We cross the street like prayers.

[interruption]

*“I was sitting in the room right outside the chapel, which I will never forget. Because I was sitting on the couch, and I think I felt complete and total despair. That’s the only way to say how I felt. And so this nun walked by, and she turned and looked at me and said, ‘Is there anything I can do for you?’ And I realized that no one could help me, that just no one could help me. So I said to her, ‘No. Thank you.’ And she left.*

*“And so I got up and I went into the chapel and I was just kneeling there, and I have no idea ... I doubt I was saying anything. I think I was just looking at the cross above the altar. And then out of the blue – out of the absolute blue – suddenly everything went gold and the crucifix was shimmering and I had this unbelievable experience of God loving me and I jumped up and ran out and ran to my room.*

*“I was standing in my room and I said – I think out loud – I said, ‘I love myself.’*

*“And the minute, the very minute the word myself came out of my mouth, I knew I had been completely transformed. Because up to that point, I would have never said that. I would have said, ‘I love you.’ Because I had no sense of self. I thought of myself as you. And the minute the word ‘myself’ came out of my mouth, I knew and I’ve always known – ever since – I would never, ever cross that line again.”*

-Marsha Linehan

## Book of Judges

“From so much self-thinking, I'm now my thoughts and not I.”

- Bernardo Soares, *Disquietude*

“We are all just trying to be holy.”

-Richard Siken, "Snow and Dirty Rain"

i.

A vow is a promise to G-d, and, if spoken, becomes binding.

Judaism forbids wasting time. Therefore, one must always be thinking.

Judaism encourages the act of questioning. For example:

If G-d is omniscient, what is the difference between a thought and an action?

If a vow is inevitable, why does G-d not simply possess our bodies and make us carry out his will?

If G-d is omnipotent and omnipresent, is there no divide between G-d and our thoughts?

If G-d is thinking us, are our actions his thoughts? Can we ever belong to ourselves?

Judaism forbids wasting time. Therefore, one must always be thinking or allowing oneself to be thought.

ii.

Intrusive thoughts are thoughts that become trapped inside a person and contradict them.

The thoughts are usually violent, sexual, or sacrilegious. They target what matters most to the person. Priests cannot shake out thoughts of worshipping the devil. Pacifists dream their hands marked with blood.

These thoughts are not a problem unless one becomes distressed by them. Thinking about thinking the thoughts causes them to multiply.

iii.

Before the world, G-d was called Ein Sof:  
the absence of an ending.  
Or he would have been called that  
had there been anyone  
to call him anything.

Before our world, the universe  
was a bowl of infinite light.  
Being made by an omnipotent Being, the light was limitless.  
Its particles vibrated with infinite speed.  
Its brightness would have burned away the senses  
had anyone existed to perceive it.

With no end, the light left no space  
for the world to exist.

So G-d created the void,  
using his omnipotence  
to dim his omnipotence.

This was called tsimtsum, reduction.  
Or more accurately: tsimtsumim,  
these reductions being plural.

Through these series of reductions  
G-d quieted his divine energy.  
Today it is almost imperceptible.

One tsimtsum more  
and nothing at all could exist.

iv.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder seems to correlate  
with abnormalities in the medulla oblongata,  
the brain region that protects us by instilling  
shame, danger, fear, guilt, dread, and panic.  
If the medulla oblongata ceases to regulate itself,  
and an action is taken to alleviate distress,  
stress hormones continue to flow.

Unable to get relief, a person becomes trapped in actions  
that promise to alleviate the stress.  
They pray obsessively, or sanitize their hands until they crack.  
They avoid crossing streets. They avoid speaking.



They go to their homes  
and lock themselves in  
over and over.

The disorder is not in the action but the thought.  
Or not in the thought, but in thinking  
about the thought, allowing the thought,  
or avoidance of the thought,  
to take control of one's actions.

Likewise, agoraphobia is not the fear of open spaces,  
but the fear of losing control  
in front of people in these spaces. Of spilling out  
of one's routine  
and being seen as one is.

v.

It is unclear  
whether the thoughts change the shape of the brain  
or if the shape of the brain dictates the thoughts.  
Most likely both are true.  
The thoughts teach the brain how to think them.

vi.

In the Book of Judges, Yiptah vows to sacrifice his daughter.

In English, Yiptah is called Jephthah, though Hebrew has no sound for "J"  
and no sound for "th."

Yiptah was a military leader from the tribe of Menasseh,  
a tribe whose descendants have since vanished  
into the diaspora.

Somewhere there are people related to him, though they do not know it.

Yiptah vowed to lead the Children of Israel in battle against the Children of Ammon.  
He vowed that, if he returned victorious, he would sacrifice  
the first living thing to emerge from his house.

He led the Children of Israel in battle against the Children of Ammon and returned  
victorious.

When he returned home, his daughter ran out to greet him.

Yiptah tore his clothes and cried.

vii.

In Judaism, the devil serves G-d  
because if G-d is omnipotent  
the devil must be working for him.

viii.

The statistics regarding obsessive-compulsive disorder  
are filled with voids and contradictions.

There is no brain scan capable of diagnosing mental illness.  
Therefore, diagnosis can only be based  
on self-reported thoughts and behaviors.

No person can fully enter the mind of another,  
so diagnosis is an act of faith.  
Doctors must trust that patients mean what they say  
and are able to communicate it.

This approach does not account for children who develop obsessions  
before acquiring speech,  
or for patients whose obsessions with faith and morality  
may be misread as delusions,  
or for the majority of those with obsessive-compulsive disorder  
who do not seek treatment.

It does not account  
for how shame silences shame.

ix.

According to the Book of Judges, Yiptah's daughter does not protest.  
She asks for two months to spend with her friends and in nature.  
She is a good daughter. She does not argue with her father  
or with the G-d who does not speak in this story.

The Book of Judges never gives her name.

x.

Some doctors hypothesize that obsessive-compulsive disorder  
is not a disorder itself, but rather a class of conditions  
which involve fixations: on body image, morality,

rules, goodness, safety, hygiene, achievement,  
exercise, or apparent delusions – in short, any psychic distress  
that results from a thought  
that will not leave.

How does one distinguish  
conscientiousness from obsession,  
eccentricity from ailment,  
faith from scrupulosity?

At what point does a thought  
become an illness?

Diagnosis is made by the extent of distress  
as reported by the patient. Not the thought itself  
but its persistence.

Without the thoughts we build our lives around  
what are we left with?

xi.

The binding of Isaac is central to Jewish identity.  
The refusal to sacrifice a human life for divine honour.  
The message that giving up human life  
is not something that is asked of us.

A defining characteristic in Judaism,  
is that human life is valued more highly  
than an inflexible moral code.

Human life is more holy than laws.  
This is why blood transfusions and surgeries are permitted,  
although it is forbidden to wound one's body.

In the story of Yiptah, G-d's voice does not roar.  
He does not turn the air stony  
or freeze Yiptah's raised hand.

G-d does not appear in the story  
except in Yiptah's thoughts and possible actions.  
In the story of Yiptah, G-d is both an absence  
and a thought that does not leave.

Some scholars say that G-d refused to stop Yiptah,

so that he may stand as example against rash vows.

Some say this story is intended to depict  
the moral decline of the Israelites.  
To show they had lost their identity.

Some say he did not sacrifice his daughter.  
That the particle "ו" (*veh*) does not mean "and" as in modern Hebrew,  
but "or." That Yiptah had declared that whatever came to greet him  
would be either burnt as an offering or dedicated to G-d.

This millennium's Jewish scholars mostly agree  
that Yiptah's daughter was permitted to live,  
though forbidden to marry  
and that she was kept in solitary and perpetual confinement.  
This is agreed to be an adequate loss of a life.

Rashi believes Yiptah was punished,  
afflicted with an illness which caused his limbs to rot  
and fall to the earth. No one knows  
where the pieces of him are buried  
or when we walk over him.

xii.

In experiences of obsessive-compulsive disorder,  
one fears that their fears are actually their fantasies.  
That one thinks of committing harm  
because of desire, rather than anxiety.

One fear is that a person will act  
out the worst-case scenario  
to finally bring an end to the fear  
of the worst-case scenario.  
For example: hurting oneself  
to alleviate fear of hurting oneself.

This only seems to happen  
in terms of self-harm.  
In interpersonal relationships, hypermorality  
generally leads to avoidance rather than aggression.  
The person ends relationships for fear of harming the other.  
They may not leave the house. They may decide  
to never hold or touch another person.

To avoid contaminating others, they quarantine themselves inside their thoughts.

Some people cannot cross streets.  
Some people cannot hold their children.

It is a gradual narrowing of the world.

xiii.

In the beginning, G-d created the void  
and this void was free will.  
In the beginning, G-d gave us his absence  
and, in so doing, gave us himself.

To those who believe in tsimtsum,  
the absence of apparent miracles  
is itself evidence  
of G-d's gift to us.

xiv.

It is impossible to know the fatality rate of obsessive-compulsive disorder.  
Not only do many cases go un- or mis- diagnosed,  
it is usually comorbid with other health conditions  
and you cannot ask the mental reasoning of a person who is gone.

According to some mental health advocates,  
it is unethical to refer to a person as having "committed" suicide,  
as this language implies both a crime and a choice. Instead,  
one is supposed to say "died by."

xv.

Kol Nidre is an Aramaic legal document  
that once a year is spoken as a prayer.

Kol Nidre means "all vows." It opens Yom Kippur,  
the Day of Atonement, which begins at night  
as Jewish days do.

Kol Nidre states: we renounce all vows we make  
between this and the next Yom Kippur.  
Let them all be relinquished and abandoned,  
null and void.

Rabbis have gone on to clarify  
that this invalidation of vows only applies  
if one makes the vow without thinking of Kol Nidre.  
If one makes a vow insincerely, the vow is considered genuine.

In the 12th century, Rabbi Meir ben Samuel added the words,  
"We do repent of them all." Both the vow and repentance  
must be intentional.

Kol Nidre has been protested by both Jews and gentiles.  
It has been held as evidence that Jews are untrustworthy.  
It has been viewed as a catalyst for reckless vows  
and impending corruption.

It continues to be sung.

Kol Nidre is sung three times, first almost a whisper. Then louder. Then louder.

Some sing it more than three times.

The congregation sings it over and over, again and again, to include anyone  
who arrives late.

xvi.

According to the idea of tsimtsum  
G-d withdrew from the world  
to make space  
for the world to exist.

This may or may not contradict  
Spinoza's radical theory  
that G-d is the world itself.

xvii.

Yiptah's daughter may have been named Seila or she may have been named Adah.

She also may have been named something else entirely.

xvii.

Judaism promises neither heaven nor hell.  
We must live in this world as though it is enough.

xviii.

Some lives I can't live and some I can.

## A History of Drowning

Thou fondling, thou, why dost thou raught the fickle image so?  
The thing thou seekest is not there.

- Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, translation by Arthur Golding

In the dance I weave my shadow tangles and breaks.

- Li Po, "Drinking Alone by Moonlight," translation by Arthur Waley



*Li Bai*

they call you the banished transcendent  
say you were once a white star fallen to the earth  
to drink and wander, immortal of the wine cup  
spilling poetry with ease

*zui* meaning not so much drunk  
as lifted out of yourself

all your life and all of life  
a dream spreading out  
red wine across a tablecloth

in daylight your senses dissolve  
where the sea's blue emptiness  
meets the sky's blue emptiness

*Narcissus*

When you were born, Liriope's child,  
blind prophet Tiresias saw your future and spoke,  
"He will live a long life, so long as he never  
looks in on himself."

So you grew long-limbed as the deer you hunted  
and laughed at those who loved your beauty.

Your mother hid the mirrors. You ate only  
from unpolished bowls, and stone spoons  
that returned no image

and learned to see yourself only  
in the eyes that loved you.

*Li Bai*

your spirit dreams the long sky  
lets itself be carried like a blossom on the river  
a weed tumbled over dry earth

you drink alone beneath the moon  
with the stars your hand could pluck  
but doesn't

*Narcissus*

When Echo saw you, her body  
melted into flame. She still had a body then  
before loneliness turned  
her voice to wind,  
her bones to gravel.

Is anyone here?

*Here.*

Come to me.

*Come to me.*

Why do you run?

*Why do you run?*

May I die before what's mine is yours.

*What's mine is yours.*

and you turned and ran

*Li Bai*

like petals fill the holes in your clothing  
you let your voice be filled with other voices:  
a jade lute on spring wind. a crow in the night.

the river merchant's wife  
yearns across the Qutang gorge.

you see yourself off like a friend.

*Narcissus*

sleepless, your eyes grow shadows  
the shadows on the grass      extending  
    with the hours you wait                      the days

arms open to touch                      yourself  
    within the emptying pool

    you know he is you  
that you have what you want  
    inside you  
        though untouchable

    you love that distance  
beyond beauty  
        his bodiless possibility  
            of being anything

    two souls in one  
        or none

you beat your chest  
your skin thinning  
you close the eyes that loved you

and open your arms  
    to drown inside him

you fall forward  
    through the image of yourself

*Li Bai*

you were born in myth  
and you drowned in myth  
your star sinking

beneath the ripples

in the pooled moon.

you were drunk, of course.  
no one would have it any other way.  
we'll discard all accounts  
that say otherwise.

you lived as you loved.

drowned in the moon  
you tried to embrace.

your star's particles  
sink

into the long night

*two shadows in water*

we lay down our days  
inside what we love

slowly sinking  
inside what we love.



cracks

I think you understand  
my soul is porous  
A broken window  
letting in both birdsong  
and rot.

I think you understand  
these thin membranes.  
These cracked foundations.  
That I want to give you something  
that lasts.

That I wanted to tell you, how,  
in your arms,  
in the white space of your kitchen,  
I felt safety at an intensity like tears. The knots in my shoulders  
opened at your palms,  
and I thought, *nothing*  
*inside me*  
*will hurt you.*

I held that. Under my skin like a promise  
I hold that.

Opposite of fear.  
We pull each other  
into each other

and make this enough.  
The furniture in now-our kitchen.  
The chairs you built yourself.  
The cookies only slightly burned.  
The space I've cleared off the table  
so we can sit.

Though I don't always know how to fit  
inside my skin, I hope you know  
I want this.

Us, standing, here.  
Our legs in a forest  
of dog-gnawed chairlegs.

Cobwebs kicked off our shins,  
the old fear tangled  
with our socks in the corner.

I am learning to be where I am.

This bareness and this glitter  
of dust in the lowering sun.  
These bodies of air and hemoglobin,  
mostly water, and even more  
empty space:

These bodies that allow us  
to touch  
and hold  
and speak: we too  
are capable of beauty.

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In "Book of Judges" the line "One tsimsum more, and nothing at all could exist" is taken from Chabad dot org.

The quote that opens this manuscript is taken from a twitter post by Carrie Fisher. "[interruption]" is taken from a 2011 interview between Marsha Linehan and the New York Times.

Some of the poems in this project have appeared, often in previous forms, in additional publications.

"Insomnia" was featured as the University of Calgary's Poem of the Season.

"the old woman's hands" and "broken sunrise" have appeared in *Frogpond*.

"this is one of those moods" has appeared in *Foliate Oak*.

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