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# Post(al) Apocalypse: A Letter About Virginia Woolf's Fictional Letters

Ethan Widlansky

4/30/2022

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Readers: Colleen Rosenfeld and Aaron Matz

Submitted to the Department of English at Pomona College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Senior Exercise.

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Thank you, Professor Matz, for entertaining my initial thoughts on what my thesis might look like and reading many pages of my bad prose. I wouldn't have picked up Woolf, let alone read her with any biographical or analytical depth, without your author course on Woolf and time during office hours.

How does one thank someone who is no longer alive? Who has only a copyright trust in her name? Perhaps one writes a letter? Thank you, Virginia Woolf, for your life and words, sweet beneath the leaf.

Mom- thank you for life and love. My gratitude will never be enough.

*“All day, all night the body intervenes; blunts or sharpens, colors or discolors, turns to wax in the warmth of June, hardens to tallow in the murk of February. [...] [O]f all this daily drama of the body, there is no record.”* -Virginia Woolf, “On Being Ill”

Dear Mom,

I’m writing for you – with greater care than “to,” a mere address, an explicit velocity between sender and receiver, subject and object. For carries care. I’m writing about us – a plural pronoun that alternately includes me and you; you, me, and Virginia Woolf; Woolf and me. In playing with pronouns, I am emulating Woolf and the way she sometimes brings readers in and, at others, alienates them as spectators. I imagine you, reading this, are thinking about what you wrote in college, which has you thinking about how long it’s been since you were an undergraduate, which has you thinking about and reaching for your hair, bleeding with red Henna dye – a transfusion of a vitality whose opposite is the color grey. It’s probably late at night; I don’t imagine that you have much time during the day, in between seeing clients and taking care of the dogs and buying food and carting Eliza and Gareth to and from school. A pair of acetate reading glasses holds your hair in place. Your hand is on your temple. A dying bulb on the deck washes your face in yellow light.

I set out to write about eating distress in Virginia Woolf. I wanted to write about mothers, too, in her fiction and essays, because, as Chris Kraus puts it, “Mother is Food.”<sup>1</sup> I began by investigating one of Woolf’s fictional letters, written in *Jacob’s Room*. There, the letter arrives at breakfast. This coincidence followed me into my other readings on mothering and food, so I

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<sup>1</sup> Kraus, Chris. 2000. *Aliens and Anorexia*. MIT Press. 169.

decided to discuss Woolf's fictional epistolary form for an entire chapter. And then, after winter break, an entire chapter became an entire thesis.

I'm writing for you because, of everyone I have met and have yet to meet, you know me best. In eighth grade, I developed an eating disorder. You would catch me at the door and ask if I had eaten. I would say yes, but I knew you knew I hadn't. Your coat would trail behind you like a cape on your way to the kitchen. We were always in a hurry, then. And always late. I wanted to be all that I needed to finish the day – and I thought that this might make you proud. But there was less of me to be proud of by the day.

As I remember this time, we'd spent the past few months living in rentals until the contract work on our kitchen was completed. We received a discounted sublet because the previous tenant had died in the tub; our next apartment was across from a graveyard. You would sell the house only a few months after we moved back into it. I didn't know it yet, but Dad had been laid off and we had made plans to move to Seattle. For those few months back in the house, your new kitchen was a space of transit, not nutrition. It wasn't the dirty, blue-tiled nook where I once experimented with foods and Playdoh, sometimes interchangeably, but dark-stained wood and marble countertops purchased on loan. You bought a puddy to patch the scuffs we made on your new cabinetry and an astringent cleaner to wipe the surfaces of our life, the crumbs of the food that fed it.

Remember when you and I started to make fun of one another in that sassy, nasal register? I would bring up your fancy education whenever you made a mess of your planner or forgot something or made a wrong turn. You told me, years later, that you let me talk to you in this way because you knew that I needed an outlet for a deep reservoir of anger. Its direction, its undulations, not understood by neither you nor I: hormones, moving homes, sitters you paid just

above a minimum wage. You knew that I needed someone, somewhere. And I only had you and school, which never spoke to me as a person, but a student. You were my one and where. You never showed me anywhere, or anyone else. I didn't know how to live a life other than the crumbling domestic fantasy you and dad had built around us. Until we moved to Seattle, I didn't know that I could continue living as a queer man. You might write something like:

*Ethan,*

*I asked you "are you sure?" when you came out at 17, but my question wasn't about you. It was about me as a mother, and an eventual grandmother. You and your siblings are growing up. When you came out to me, as when you came out of me, you were still more my son than someone else. Someone else's, who might love you just short of how much I do. I couldn't give you that. I'm sorry.*

*When you were younger, you lost 25% of your hearing to dairy. A homeopath listened to your body and told you to cut out cow's milk. It worked. After two ineffectual surgeries, not drinking milk let you listen again. By not taking in one thing, you recovered a whole sense. I imagine my psychoanalytic peers will think this milk mine, a premature separation from my love and nutrition. But I never stopped loving you. My love for you changed; it enforced a peculiar deprivation. Made general, this deprivation might cure all dis-ease. To take the dis out of ease, the poor out of poor health, I had to practice the suffix. Privation gifts more health and age, even if its logic actually suggests multiplied poverty. Health is irony.*

*So I took dairy out of my own diet. Then gluten. Then carbs, then again, I couldn't take carbs out. So I put them back in. I subscribed to newsletters which told me what foods to stay away from, what I needed to not put into my body so I could sense the world fully: hear it, see it*



*smell it, feel it. Taste took a back seat. I deprived myself because I care about you and your brother and your sister and your dad. I know you don't like it when I tell you to deprive, too, but I tell you to because I love you. I asked you "are you sure?" because I wasn't yet ready to deprive myself of you.*

*Love,*

*Mom*

I learned to code health as an absence, an emptiness. Empty was healthy was good. I agreed that the masses of tissue Western doctors removed from my nose and throat, the plastic cylinders they inserted into my ears, the c-section and forceps they used to take me out of you, had been all for naught. I told you after the appointments with chiropractors and acupuncturists that I had never felt healthier, emptier: drained of mucus. The truth is that I wanted to make *you* feel better. And you felt better when you thought I felt better. This was my way of being there for you, answering yours of being there for me. I worked so hard to be healthy; when you told me to hear over taste, I answered with anorexia. The truth is, I haven't had an ear infection in years.

Kim Hyesoon writes in "A Gift – Day Thirty": "the only thing you can give birth to yourself is, your death."<sup>2</sup> What you give birth to, however, is made distant from death a by comma. Even your death isn't fully yours; you give it life by living. It's one exhale away from being yours, as the stale air held in your lungs ceases to make your life when you die. Death is no one's. How is it that we talk about death like it is ours while we are still alive?

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<sup>2</sup> Hyesoon, Kim. 2018. *Autobiography of Death*. New Directions Publishing.

Eat and ease share an assonance; sometimes I choose to taste instead of hear.

Guilt motivated me in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade, when I began to starve myself. Everything I turned in at school was an apology for being, even though I didn't know yet what kind of being that was. I was an unfitting and unwilling metaphor: a fag, a fairy, a queen, a queer. I shrunk myself so those labels might slip off me like clothes that fit too large. So I tried to learn how to write my own metaphors. I dressed myself in another language, collected from books. But these metaphors are less than imperfect. As a metaphor learning to speak in metaphor, writing takes on mutually constructive properties. What I write makes me up as I make it up. I am an enlarged self who is at once themselves and a projection of meaning.

Scholar Elisabeth Grosz says: “the human subject is capable of suicide, of anorexia, because the body is meaningful, has significance, because it is in part constituted for both the subject and for others in terms of meanings and significances.” My fantasy of my body as a pure, lean fuel for me points only towards death, survived by significance. All that would be left, once my body has eaten itself, is its metaphor. Suicide and anorexia are extant; their bodies rot. To spare my body, to dress it, to weight it with flesh, not meaning, resists metaphor until I learn how to write it.

I'm trying to write myself, now. Is it working?

In this project, I'm also trying to imagine a different way of living, of communicating by putting parts of oneself and one's addressee into writing. Donna Haraway says in “Cyborg Feminism”:

a cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end or until the world ends; it

takes irony for granted. One is too few, and two is only one possibility. Intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment. The machine is an *it* not to be animated, worshiped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment.<sup>3</sup>

I was born from you, not a garden. I am my body and its metaphors, mine and everyone else's. I am a cyborg. I argue for the letter form as a way of experimenting with alternate ways of making ourselves up: our stories and our bodies. Because "writing is preeminently the technology of cyborgs,"<sup>4</sup> according to Haraway. I think of the letter as a cyborg technology, written in one's hand, as a prosthetic communication. Haraway furnishes language for a phenomenon I call remembering, an act of re-assembling "aspect[s] of [one's] embodiment." Of suspending one's personal narratives and images and what prompted one's recall and what others have said about this memory fragment, and then putting them all back together in reading or writing. The items in this list are members, fragments, of oneself. Re-remembering is an activity that integrates past, present, and future expectation.

Thomas Szaz, a Hungarian psychoanalyst, believes "addiction, obesity, starvation, anorexia nervosa" to be "political problems, not psychiatric; each condenses and expresses contest between the individual and some person or persons in his environment over the control of the individual's environment."<sup>5</sup> Yes, we've established that I am not entirely myself. But Szaz argues, further, that I am in contest with my selves, and the politics which shape them. I twisted politics, a social phenomenon, into an asocial oxymoron: a politics of fragmentary *selves*.

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<sup>3</sup> Haraway, Donna. 1985. *A Cyborg Manifesto*. University of Minnesota Press. 65.

<sup>4</sup> Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto*. 57.

<sup>5</sup> Glenny, Allie. 1999. *Ravenous Identity: Eating and Eating Distress in the Life and Work of Virginia Woolf*. St. Martin's Press. 78.

I was hungry; I wanted to want, but I wasn't allowed to want and be wanted by men. So I decided not to try not to want, not to eat, at all. Nothing that wasn't already a part of me was to go inside of me. I feasted on me. And then I asked you to notice, without explicitly asking. I wanted my guilt for not knowing how to live as I am to inspire guilt in you. I wanted to make you see our swollen suburban neighborhood and the pressures it put on me by shrinking myself against it. How and where we lived sunk my skin. You told me later that you *did* notice me, but that my body changed so slowly that you did not think it was a problem.

Anorexia was my attempt at making a body-language of crisis – one that sped up the “slow death” Lauren Berlant describes in *Cruel Optimism*, so that you could see it.<sup>6</sup> Obesity, Berlant's phenomenon of concern, finds itself at odds with the words in which it is so often framed; obesity, as with anorexia, is attrition – a slow death, not an imminent one. I was trying to show you what not knowing how to live as a queer man would do to me. Crisis language is anxious, losing sight of real people in a rush towards death. Pathology and epidemic forget people, and I ran after their metaphors. But even my anorexia was too slow; my body couldn't capture words of crisis to explain how I was hurting.

I figured out that I'd had anorexia in the years I spent recovering from it. I scrolled online: symptoms included tics, picking and pulling at parts of the body like hip bones that cut above the hamstrings, like the excess skin around my elbow joint, like the fat that fills in between the two tendons taught under my lower jaw; a fixation on food, like when I watched “Cake Boss” for hours on end so I could confuse sight for a taste of the confections through the screen; too much exercise, like the hundreds of miles I ran. Online forums and studies lifted me

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<sup>6</sup> Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, 98: “They choose to misrepresent the duration and scale of the situation by calling a crisis that which is a fact of life and has been a defining fact of life for a given population that lives that crisis in ordinary time.”

at first. They were words for my experience when I had none. But their words described symptoms, not causes. Description only goes so far towards understanding dis-ease. Woolf's letters present a way out of the self-contest of anorexia. A way out, and into a world of doing and seeing.

My first chapter considers Woolf's fictional letters arriving at mealtimes in "A Letter to A Young Poet" and *Jacob's Room*. The second elaborates on Woolf's treatment of the letter in *Mrs. Dalloway*, namely the resistance the letter puts up against patriarch Peter Walsh, and how Septimus Smith tools this resistance towards "radical sociopolitical change" in his papers. Finally, I discuss Woolf's deployment of the fictional letter in *Three Guineas*, a controversial essay on war and peace. My explorations of the fictional letter in "A Letter to a Young Poet," *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *Three Guineas* on the horizon – an essayistic collection of fictional letters that speak to nothing less than patriarchy, fascism, capitalism, and war and peace.

Early in her professional career, Woolf was told she would be remembered for her letters and not her fiction. This quip made rounds through the Bloomsbury group, a society of Cambridge scholars (all men, like E.M. Forster, John Maynard Keynes, and friends of her brother Toby, who died in WWI) and a few educated women.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps it is out of embarrassment that she obscures her fictional letters in associative narration; Woolf's so-called 'free-and-direct'<sup>8</sup> form, an amalgam of subjectivity, slipping from one person to another by a thrown gaze or a scent, or a sound, or an insight, is diverted by the two-way letter. I don't mean this in a formal way: Woolf's letters integrate seamlessly as uncertain communications that go unanswered, are from an unknown writer, or are mediated and redacted. The explicit, two-way

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<sup>7</sup> Rose, Phyllis. 1978. *Woman of Letters: A Life of Virginia Woolf*. Pandora Press.

<sup>8</sup> Craft Literary Magazine <https://www.craftliterary.com/2018/11/27/free-indirect-speech/>

address, however, cuts against this conceptual, narrative grain. The letter asks after a response; they connect two people when they are physically apart. These two-way relationships are, of course, complicated by a spectatorial reader. But, as these letters are fictional, I will treat this spectatorship like a window into a laboratory: our critical lens will not change this two-node relationship (so long as we don't zoom into quantum scale). Woolf, at some points, invites us in to take a closer look. Then, 'we' are embodied with her. She sought, according to critic Anne Herman, to approximate the "unliterary character of the private letter," in her essays and speeches (emphasis mine); letters as form are "a self-conscious rhetorical strategy for the critique of a dominant [male] ideology."<sup>9</sup>

In Allie Glenny's exploration of Virginia Woolf's eating distress, the only known critical volume on the subject, she writes that anorexia "may be the last resort of the disempowered, but its very real moving potential is frighteningly evident to those who come into contact with it."<sup>10</sup> At the top of this 'potential' reaction curve, not-to-eat is a distinct "moving action." Moving in the sense of moving one's body in space. Moving in the sense of changing one's shape. Moving in the sense that I move, change the shapes my body makes in space, to keep myself in shape. Woolf is interested in this moving potential, and in translating it into social action via the letter.

Elaine Scarry, writing *The Body in Pain*, makes two categories: "unmaking" and "making."<sup>11</sup> Torture and war are deconstructive, literal in their "unmaking" of the physical world. Pain, she argues, can also inspire transcendent religion when it simultaneously ejects us from and grinds us against the wet walls of our bodies. Pain reminds us of our mortal fragility

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<sup>9</sup> Dusinberre, Juliette. 1997. *Virginia Woolf's Renaissance: Woman Reader or Common Reader?* University of Iowa Press.

<sup>10</sup> Glenny, *Ravenous Identity*. 83.

<sup>11</sup> Scarry, Elaine. 1985. *The Body in Pain*. Oxford University Press.

and brings us together, stronger among social organizations. Religion, and other collective imaginations, ‘make’ us as political peoples. Anorexia corrupts Scarry’s dyad. There is no God in a scheme that contains only fragments of the self. My torture chamber *is* my body, not a “magnification” of it.<sup>12</sup> The body becomes “a miniaturization of the world, of civilization.”<sup>13</sup> In the body, there are no objects that recall “the human being’s impulse to project himself out into a space beyond the boundaries of the body in acts of making, either physical or verbal, that once multiplied, collected and shared are called civilization,” as there are in other torture chambers (Scarry, 39). Anorexia thus forgets society while trying to resist it. The letter’s project is to divert this torture like it does the meal. Just as it diverts Woolf’s narration. In this break, the letter remembers hungry people in the world.

You used to tell me that I was “wasting away.” It was the closest you came to putting my eating disorder in your mouth. Sometimes I was “wasting away,” and others, I was “going to waste away.” When do we decide that someone or something is waste or wasted? Waste as in unproductive? Was I wasting myself? My body? The food you offered me in relative abundance? Where does this waste go? Can our letters help recover it?

This introduction is blend of personal narrative and critical priming. It aspires to an elegance that comes with more practice and more time – things I don’t have. I’m writing this for my major requirement, yes. I am also writing this for you, mom. And I’m writing this for me: how do I eat and want in a world of plenty, manufacturing great quantities of material and spiritual scarcity for billions, so just a few can live well, eat well. If we – you and me, mom – want to taste change in the systems that made me starve myself, we’ve got to start with us.

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<sup>12</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain*. 38.

<sup>13</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain*. 38.

Love,

Ethan



Section One, Memory's Members: Reading Woolf's Fictional  
Letters in "A Letter to a Young Poet" and *Jacob's Room*

In *Jacob's Room*, Woolf writes letters. The presence of these letters, which call on one sender and one receiver, cuts against Woolf's narrative outline of Jacob, diffuse and drawn by many women in his life. I first thought of these letters as anachronisms – why include write in the mode of early, serialized novels when she, like her contemporary in James Joyce, attempts something different, something new? By anachronism, I do not mean a social one, as Woolf was a prolific nonfictional letter writer. The post in the 1920s and '30s was more modern than anachronistic. By anachronism, I mean one of a more literary strain. Early novels used the epistolary form, replaced by more-fluid narrative technologies during the Victorian era, like internal monologues. Woolf's modernist writing runs like water in a clear stream. I contend that the fictional letter diverts this stream into a reservoir, a time-agnostic space for addressee and author to re-member themselves before merging, again, with the capillary – a re-entry. Sender and receiver reflect on themselves, looking into the stilled reservoir, not rippled by Woolf's narrative ambling. I will elaborate this project's operative definitions and introduce some key features of Woolf's fictional letters.

I use 'progress narrative' to refer to a story of aggregate knowledge, of increasing iterative efficiency in moving people, thoughts, and commodities around the world. It founts from a capitalist impulse to serve money by making more of it, by inventing reasons not to look back at systemic brutality because we're afraid of what we might see.<sup>14</sup> Capital dooms itself by making more capital in a world that can't sustain it; it is a slow death by binge. A slow death that, as Lauren Berlant argues in her essay by the same name, reproduces itself in the lives and diets of ordinary Westerners.<sup>15</sup> I use 'meal' to mean time-, productivity-, and power-bound

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<sup>14</sup> Klein, Naomi. 1999. *No Logo*. Picador.

<sup>15</sup> Berlant, Lauren. 2007. "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)." *Critical Inquiry* 33 (4): 754–80.

eating. To the anorexic, the meal is despotic. It demands that one eat by the binge's timeline as the meal falls between school and work.

The "penny-post" is a project of progress. Woolf uses the hyphenated term to refer to an accessible network of letters and letter-writing. Pen and paper had become cheap, and so too stamps and delivery. Literacy rates exponentiated. The penny-post letter is both a technology, something that accelerates the binge, *and* a contrary mode of intimate – slow and profound – communication. I will grant that the letter's logistical species does not necessarily make it a capitalist tool – only an organizational one. That said, if we consider that capital illudes more of itself not by literally making more of itself but by moving faster (this is called money velocity), the penny post letter becomes part and parcel to capital's fantasy of perfect market efficiency, closer, that is, than the pigeon. Think high frequency trading. Hereafter, I use "letter" as synonymous with the penny-post.

Just as the letter diverts Woolf's prose by its conceptually anomalous form, it dizzies the progress narrative by stirring emotion and remembrance. Woolf posits a 'memory' that does more than just look back. In the break from free-and-direct narration, Woolf's fictional letters create a 'time-agnostic' space. In this space, the letter-reader and -writer meet and exchange parts of themselves. The letter-reader approaches from the future, the letter-writer from the past. I read this exchange, this mutual re-membering, or re-constitution, to be a prosthetic trade. To re-member oneself is to make a composite of oneself, partially fiction, memory, and fact. Each of these items is a member. The space in which this re-membering takes place is time-agnostic; it doesn't favor the writer's nor the reader's past and future temporalities. I use 'time-agnostic space' as shorthand – a second dimensional phrase that refers to a third dimension (space), diagonal to a fourth-dimensional past and future.

Re-membering takes on a cyborg connotation. I find a theoretical basis for this meeting in Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto." Haraway blends self and technology in service of revolution by "re-becoming."<sup>16</sup> Re-membering is like Haraway's re-becoming, deploying tools which once "marked [folks] as other" to build a world "before Man,"<sup>17</sup> structures that prop men up at the top. She turns to before "Man" to re-member the world that will survive it. "Re" looks back, aware of its history and place in the world. Haraway believes there is a better way to communicate and to eat, to feed and make oneself up by story and food. And so does Woolf. In this section, I will animate the letter as Woolf's tool in imagining a world "before Man," in dis-membering its support structures.

The letter asks that reader and writer color the other, equally. While it attempts equilibrium, the spaces the letter enters are often charged with sex: domestic and commercial spaces, a letter from mother-to-son, from lover-to-lover. We will see it ebb with these spaces and resist inequalities, lopsided temporalities, normativities, and sanities. The letter is an inclusive form. To this end, in *Jacob's Room*, Woolf says: "Mrs. Flanders wrote letters; Mrs. Jarvis wrote them; Mrs. Durrant too; Mother Stuart actually scented her pages, thereby adding a flavour which the English language fails to provide."<sup>18</sup> While that last note lands comically, "flavour" may also be construed as an emphasis on using different sensibilities, like taste, in addition to sight, to read the letter.

Woolf advocates for *attempting* communication. She delegates the anorexic's 'politics of self' to the letter. When the letter diverts the meal's yoke on food, on nutrition, the anorexic turns towards their relationships: re-membering letter readers and writers. Towards eating their fill,

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<sup>16</sup> Haraway, Donna. 1985. *A Cyborg Manifesto*. University of Minnesota Press, 55.

<sup>17</sup> Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 55.

<sup>18</sup> Woolf, Virginia. 1998. *Jacob's Room*. Dover Publications, 72.

and filling political spaces instead of shrinking their body. Towards tasting their words as much as they look at them.

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#### TIME-AGNOSTIC SPACE

\*\*

That the letter is a tool of intimacy *and* capitalist production troubles Woolf. She troubles the letter in turn. Woolf wrote “A Letter to a Young Poet” to John Lehmann, who joined her and Leonard as part of their in-house publication company, Hogarth Press. It’s difficult to categorize “A Letter to a Young Poet” as fiction. I have chosen the problematic genre of essay because its wide and uncertain boundaries can include both fiction and nonfiction. The text is likely inspired by Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*, plural, which encourage their reader to find beauty where they are, among other edifications. Rilke’s were real letters. He warns: “Men have made even eating into something else: want on the one hand, excess upon the other have obscured the distinctness of this necessity, and all the deep, simple urgencies in which life renews itself have become similarly observed.”<sup>19</sup> He pits eating as a “simple urgenc[y] in which life renews itself” against eating as metaphor. Am I writing against my own project of re-membering with a laden, literary ‘eating’? One that is against life’s re-newal? Germane, instead, to death? This may be very well. I am compelled, however, to continue; perhaps we can renew eating by rewriting it away from “Men.”

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<sup>19</sup> Rilke, Rainer Maria. 1934. *Letters to a Young Poet*. Translated by M.D. Herter Norton. W.W. Norton & Company INC, 35.

Yes, the letter is not about letter writing, but about poetry. Woolf, however, chooses to write about poetry in the form of a letter and therein makes explicit reference to the epistolary form and how she imagines its success. I am interested in her formal choice, not its stated subject. Although Woolf most-obviously calls her piece a “Letter,” which might make it in the eyes of a deductive thinker, a true nonfiction letter like Rilke’s, the section in her letter-essay I will give critical treatment *is* fictive. Woolf never mailed the letter to Lehmann, but published it. Therefore, I will treat the following as fiction:

Did you ever meet, or was he before your day, that old gentleman – I forgot his name – who used to enliven conversation, especially at breakfast when the post came in, by saying that the art of letter-writing is dead? The penny-post, the old gentleman used to say, has killed the art of letter-writing. Nobody, he continued, examining an envelope through his eye-glasses, has the time even to cross their t’s. We rush, he went on, spreading his toast with marmalade, to the telephone. We commit our half-formed thoughts in ungrammatical phrases to the post card. Gray is dead, he continued; Horace Walpole is dead; Madame de Sevigne – she is dead too, I suppose he was about to add, but a fit of choking cut him short, and he had to leave the room before he had time to condemn all the arts, as his pleasure was to the cemetery... The great age of letter-writing, which, of course, is the present, will leave no letters behind it.<sup>20</sup>

The letter meets Woolf, Lehmann, and the old gentleman. Memory informs the writer’s and the reader’s temporally bound actions of writing and reading; memory shapes anticipatory writing and aids narrative reconstruction while reading. “Did you ever,” asks after this kind of

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<sup>20</sup> Woolf, Virginia. 1931. “A Letter to a Young Poet,” 1931.

recall. Woolf writes it, anticipating memory, and Lehmann colors in her intention with memories of his own.

If the letter were to be a grammatical structure, it would be a preposition for its function in connecting and giving velocity to subject action in relation to its indirect object; I make this categorical analogy because, here, Woolf writes *without* a preposition. The preposition creates a power imbalance between a subject and indirect object; the writer has privileged knowledge of what they wrote to, about, for their addressee. Woolf equalizes in “*meet*” (emphasis mine). “Did you ever meet?”; “ever” suspends the letter in time’s infinite substrate, neither past nor future, which modifies “meet.” The letter’s contents thus migrate into the time-agnostic space. It isn’t a space that exists in the letter per se, but one opened and shared by the fragments of selves that readers and writers store inside of the letter.

To meet Lehmann with the old man, regardless of whether or not they factually met, Woolf must mix memory and fact and fiction. This meeting in time-agnostic space, inspired by the “penny-post,”<sup>21</sup> is more generous than the old gentleman’s art of letter writing that preceded it. That is, the form he defines as the penny-post’s negative: “we commit half-formed thoughts in ungrammatical phrases to the post card.” Fully formed, proper, and written on finely pulped paper, the old gentleman’s letter is forbidding. Where the “art” of letter-writing emphasizes prose style and generalizes its audience, the penny-post is addressed to just one recipient. Woolf pronounces that “a good letter-reader takes the color of the reader at the other end, that from reading the one we can imagine the other.” Memory takes on color. The letter draws neutral –

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

fictional and mnemonic – territory between past and future, and then letter-readers and -writers add creative depth: shades and textures thrown into relief by time-agnostic space.

The old man indicts the art of letter-writing as “dead,” along with its authors: “Gray is dead, he continued; Horace Walpole is dead; Madame de Sevigne – she is dead too, I suppose he was about to add [...]” The old gentleman thinks of himself as imprimatur, and his readers, a passive audience. Because the mode of letter-writing-as-art is anticipatory, he positions the letters towards death, the only phenomenon we can anticipate with any certainty. Disempowered, the audience does cannot re-member in the other direction. Woolf calls the old gentleman a “necrophilist.” The reader’s subjectivity is contrarily feminized, and is so often overwritten by figures like the old gentleman; the reader turns towards birth: their mother’s womb, opening onto – brightening – their first worldly experience. The art of letter writing is “dead,” drawing this anticipation to its end; letter-writing-as-art is suicide. The old gentleman “used to say” that the “penny-post [...] has killed the art of letter-writing.” Perhaps more accurately, though, the penny-post *survives* the art of letter writing. It is the man who laments letter-writing as art who dies, *not* the letter. Woolf’s penny-post flourishes in the vacuum of letter-writing-as-art.<sup>22</sup>

The old man prepares breakfast: marmalade spread on a piece of toast. Just as he never opens the envelope before him, he never actually eats his breakfast; he only anticipates doing so. While one can eat and read at the same time — and while breakfast may be construed as ‘morning-time,’ as letters arrive with time-bound regularity, not meal bound — the letter arrives at “breakfast,” not ‘morning-time.’ And when it arrives, it disorders the old gentleman’s eating:

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<sup>22</sup> This paradigm mimics the death of her father, whose death, Woolf believes, allowed her to write; her father, Leslie Stephen, was a Victorian literato. See: Rose, Phyllis. 1978. *Woman of Letters: A Life of Virginia Woolf*. Pandora Press.



he chokes. Winding up for her punchline, Woolf sets up her letter-essay as a foil to the old man's anxious letter-writing mode. She thrusts us into the present-conditional sense, where past and future meet – where she, Lehmann, and the old man's memory convene in time-agnostic space. All of this is made possible by keeping the other in mind. Woolf duly speculates: "I suppose he was about to add." What the old man was about to say comingles in the same anticipatory space as the letter and bite of toast. What he was about to say – coming *out* of his mouth – collides with the food coming *in*. The letter finds itself somewhere in between: forced back into the prepositional middle of subject and object. It is between being itself and a metonymy, representative of the "art of letter-writing"'s decay. It is between being unable to transmit what is written on it, as the old man never opens the envelope, and being what the old gentleman says it is: "half-formed thoughts in ungrammatical phrases to the post card." In other words, the letter is stuck between a denunciation of itself and a piece of toast: "he was about to add, but a fit of choking cut him short, and he had to leave the room before he had time to condemn all the arts, as his pleasure was, to the cemetery [...]." Woolf's old gentleman asks the letter to mean simultaneously more and less than it is. More because the old man asks the letter to symbolize the decay of letter-writing. Less because the old man never reads the letter's content. Woolf suspects that the old man was to condemn all "arts to the cemetery as was his pleasure to do," but, instead, chokes on his words as he does his toast; eating thus becomes an entangled problem of metaphor – whose content is epistolary. Woolf condemns the old gentleman to the cemetery. So much for "enlive[ning] conversation." As the penny-post survives the letter-writing-as-art, Woolf and Lehmann survive the old gentleman. She champions the "present" as the "great age of letter-writing." That the present is a great age is reflexive, as great ages are determined by

looking back, and then held up as a model for the future. Time-agnostic space is similarly a present where past and future meet, although not all presents are time-agnostic spaces.

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#### THE PROTOTYPE: *Jacob's Room*

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Woolf's discussion of the letter in *Jacob's Room* predates "A Letter to a Young Poet." The two bear an uncanny resemblance. The letter finds itself in *Jacob's Room*, as opposed to *A Room of One's Own*.<sup>23</sup> If we think of the letter as creating a time-agnostic space within *Jacob's Room*, which asks us to think of it as *his* space, things start to get meta. *Jacob's Room* is a portrayal of Jacob through the memories of women around him, sharing in memory with the fictional letters exchanged in the book. It is not Jacob's room, but women's outline of it. *Jacob's Room* is a largely practice in memory that looks back, re-membering Jacob before the trenches. It resists the forward-looking old gentleman.

Jacob's bildungsroman emerges as a lightly penciled sketch from Woolf's prose. As the Woolfian letter inspires memory, and Jacob *is* memory — his body buried somewhere on the Western Front — Jacob and the letter form a close affiliation. Woolf's elaboration on the letter which comes at breakfast, follows:

Let us consider letters – how they come at breakfast, and at night, with their yellow stamps and their green stamps, immortalized by the postmark – for to see one's own envelope on another's table is to realize how soon deeds sever and become alien. Then at

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<sup>23</sup> Woolf's most-popular paperback follows a fictional woman through Oxford's campus, barred to women. She asks for a room and pay of her own – and for all upper-class women – to cultivate genius.

last the power of the mind to quit the body is manifest, and perhaps we fear or hate or wish annihilated this phantom of ourselves, lying on the table. Still, there are letters that merely say how dinner's at seven; others ordering coal; making appointments. The hand in them is scarcely perceptible, let alone the voice or the scowl. Ah, but when the post knocks and the letter comes always the miracle seems repeated – speech attempted.

Venerable are letters, infinitely brave, forlorn, and lost (Woolf, 71).

Woolf embodies “us,” to “consider letters” with her. We are made Woolf's equal in the problem of distance human communication. This, as opposed to the old gentleman's letter-writing-as-art, which has no interest in “us.” Woolf asks us to assist in re-membering Jacob, putting him together scene by scene. Instead of dwelling on the Western Front's wafting mustard gas, death, and destruction – reflection that places (white) patriarchy at narrative center<sup>24</sup> – Woolf enlists us in an act of creation, of re-membering in a vulnerable space shared by “us” (Woolf, 76).

She meditates on a letter from Jacob's mother, Betty Flanders, which finds a young Jacob having sex in an adjacent bedroom: “behind the door was the obscene thing, the alarming presence, and terror would come over her as at death, or the birth of a child” (Woolf, 72). Jacob emerges “like a baby after airing,” and his rendezvous, Florinda, “followed, lazily, stretching, yawning a little; arranging her hair at the looking-glass – while Jacob read his mother's letter” (Woolf, 71). His mother's letter is in the hallway, soaked in sex. Woolf's narrator speculates on the letter's contents: stay away from unchaste women, wear thick shirts, and a longing anaphora, “come back, come back, come back to me” (Woolf, 72). Woolf, however, never reveals the

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<sup>24</sup> Viet Tan Nguyen writes in his book on war and memory, Thanh Nguyen, Viet. 2016. *Nothing Ever Dies*. Harvard University Press, 121.: “The American may know he is a savage, but he takes comfort in being at the center of the story, while the savage is only subject to the American story.”

letter's actual content. She merely asks us to "consider letters." To begin, I'd like to examine the letter in space.

The letter, which is a technology of closeness when sender and receiver are apart, is separated by a door from a carnal union. This union represents the most-intimate kind of "meeting" in between birth and death. Woolf, in placing the letter so close to sex in space, reads them as parallel. The letter follows Jacob's sexual union with a prosthetic one: "at last," says Woolf dripping with inevitability, "the power of the mind to quit the body is manifest." The mind quits the body so that it may travel to *somebody* else; so that others may adopt parts of it in time-agnostic space. Betty Flanders would've been overcome with "terror... as death, or the birth of a child" (Woolf, 72). "Terror" suspends her between birth and death and colors time-agnostic space. Terror means that she has colored in Jacob just as much as she considers herself in writing a letter to him. Terror in anticipating a reply, in realizing that she's wrong about him, or that he doesn't remember her. Jacob, of her womb, has a room of his own. In it, he is inside of another woman, of whom he is reborn. The exchange is dangerous and intimate, a collision of self-imaginings and expectations. While it is one thing for Mrs. Flanders to anticipate Jacob having sex with an unchaste woman, as Woolf's narrator tells us she does, it is something else entirely for a part of her mind, quit from the body, to *meet* Jacob after the sex act. As the letter is delivered of her, so was Jacob. He has "severed and become alien," looking at a letter whose hand, whose script, used to be attached to the body in which he was once gestated. Jacob is no longer a dependent; he re-members his mom as she re-members him.

Fear of the unexpected come to pass on the writer's part, and past writerly judgements, confirmed on the reader's part – as Betty Flanders's warnings to Jacob – may lead one to try and out-will the other. The writer may try to overpower their reader with prepositions. Alternately,

the reader may choose not to read nor respond to nor integrate the letter as prosthetic. Coming to the possibility of this disagreement, Woolf's narrator identifies a want to "annihilate" the letter. Woolf attests that "life would split asunder" (Woolf, 71). Indeed, the world would sunder into readers or writers, birth and death. Life would be lost without vulnerable communication made possible by "terror" and bravery to overcome it. The anorexic inhabits this split; the letter is their bridge, their lifeline.

Between past and future, the letter is "immortal." "Immortal" because the letter endures longer than the human body. It is a part of the mind that outlasts the minds which wrote and read it. The time-agnostic space it opens does not, however, endure. Woolf continues, "to realize how soon deeds sever and become alien." Woolf's letters sever from one person, delivered to another. To behold one's own letter, then, is to look at a part of yourself – dis-membered from your own body. The letter, as opposed to ink on a page, scrawls in blood. Scarcely perceptible are the "hand," "the voice or the scowl." A scowl is a collection of muscle firings. The grain of a voice is not something one can grasp; it slips through fingers like sand. In the language of physics, these are waves, not particles. They can't be captured in letter-writing-as-art. And yet, Jacob can imagine them in a letter from his mom. The ephemeral scowl and voice join the hand as part of the body; they are, while scarcely perceptible, equal in grammatical weight to the hand which writes the letter. Each is "scarc[e]." Woolf's bodies are just as much the flesh that makes them up as they are the fleeting shapes that move through space like a ghosting pen, a twitch below the eye, a shrug of a shoulder. While the letter may be immortal relative to the person who wrote it because paper doesn't rot nearly as fast as flesh, only the letter-writer and their addressed intimate may share in time-agnostic space where the re-membered other moves as they

customarily do. The malapropisms, “uncrossed t’s,”<sup>25</sup> and poor punctuation convey these movements, this life, as in “A Letter to a Young Poet.”

In keeping with her celebration of the blemish, Woolf calls this “speech attempted,” a miracle. Not “speech,” but “speech *attempted*” (emphasis mine). “Ah,” like a postcoital sigh. As if the attempt, not an outright successful nor failed one, but merely an attempt is married to “speech” to make a “miracle.” The miracle meets these two. It is vulnerability in communication, in *attempting* to communicate across distance that is the miracle. The letter-writer offers imperfections, vulnerabilities, flits, in exchange for their reader’s open mind. The letter-writer offers a part of them to make “us,” to make a miracle out of “speech attempted.” If the writer, however, fails to be vulnerable in the face of “terror,” if they relieve “us” of considering letters for “I” – like the old gentleman – if they don’t attempt, the letter resists.

We watch the letter writer’s terror of attempting play out just one page later:

Is this all? Can I never know, share, be certain? Am I doomed all my days to write letters, send voices, which fall upon the tea-table, fade upon the passage, making appointments, while life dwindles, to come and dine? Yet letters are venerable; and the telephone valiant, for the journey is a lonely one, and if bound together by notes and telephones we went in company, perhaps – who knows? – we might talk by the way (Woolf, 70).

By Woolf’s appraisal in *A Room of One’s Own*, “I” is empty.<sup>26</sup> “I” calls to God in an apostrophe – “is this all?” – for an incomplete miracle, for speech, but not “speech attempted.” “I” backs itself into a referential corner, unable to talk to anyone else but God. Woolf contains attempted

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<sup>25</sup> Woolf, “A Letter to a Young Poet.”

<sup>26</sup> Woolf writes in Woolf, Virginia. 1929. *A Room of One’s Own*. The Hogarth Press, 100.: “The shadow of the letter “I” is shapeless as mist.”

speech in “this,” when she asks if “attempted speech” is “all,” everything, there is. “I” fears that it will “never know, share, be certain.” “I” is without a qualifier, “attempt.” “I” in their quest for knowledge, monologuing, and certainty, shrinks the prospective letter to meal-logistics, as all of “life dwindles to come and dine?” “I” strengthens the meal’s hold on food. Coded male, like the old man, “I” sets itself to the violent task of “reaching, penetrating the individual heart. Were it possible!”

Woolf switches tack and valorizes the letter like a soldier off to battle: they are “venerable.” As Jacob is a soldier, so is the letter. He is written by women; a counterbalance to the old man’s war, *Jacob’s Room* opens a time-agnostic space. Woolf suggests meeting by way of “notes and telephones,” putting these technologies of closeness to use in service of “we,” instead of “I.” Notes, telephones, sender, and recipient begin to look like the matrix laid out by Donna Haraway in ‘A Cyborg Manifesto,’ in which the technologies of Man connect folks across identities to form a network of resistance against patriarchy and capitalism. Woolf’s chief letter-writing innovation, feminization, is in recognizing the constitutive role of “attempted” in the miracle of speech. That is, in what the old gentleman critiques as ungrammatical and half-formed thoughts.<sup>27</sup> These are instances of attempted speech, not speech qua speech; they take on a greater importance to Woolf than the old gentleman’s letter-writing-as-art, which writes language as it should be. “We” might talk, sharing in letter-reading and –writing terror, “by the way.”

*Jacob’s Room* sees the letter arriving, once more, at breakfast. With its delivery, its diversion, Woolf seizes creative power from the old gentleman. She advocates for a politics of

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<sup>27</sup> I beat your snide remark on this also being a description of my thesis.

“speech attempted,” and not one of “I.” Only together, “bound”<sup>28</sup> by the letter, are we able to take on the old gentleman.

The only other letter Woolf elaborates in *Jacob’s Room* is also from Mrs. Flanders – this one to her lover, Captain Barfoot. She pens it on the first page. It is “many-paged [and] tear-stained” (Woolf, 2). Her tears take on greater weight than the letter’s actual text, which is elided. It matters not what she said, but that she *attempted* vulnerable speech. That she’s experiencing terror. These “tears made all the dahlias in her garden undulate in red waves and flashed the glass house in her eyes, and spangled the kitchen with bright knives,” (Woolf, 2) they make the world run. The tears, like the prosthetic letters they wet, convey a message and open up time-agnostic space all on their own: “Mrs. Jarvis, the rector’s wife, think at a church, while the hymn-tune played and Mrs. Flanders bent low over her little boys’ heads, that marriage is a fortress and widows stray solitary in open fields, picking up stones, gleaning.” (Woolf, 2). Widowdom opens up into an expanse, a frolic, where marriage locks her up. Mrs. Jarvis learns resistance to institutional marriage, and her own, by way of the letter.

While Betty Flanders writes, a storm crowds the sky. She braces her home for a hurricane. Rain falls outside, and her tears, inside. Disaster strikes, and Mrs. Flanders writes until she is able to sleep. She “had left the lamp burning in the front room. There were her spectacles, her sewing; and a letter with the Scarborough post-mark. She had not drawn the curtains either” (Woolf, 2). Now sealed and ready to post, however, Mrs. Flander’s letter remains exposed to the weather. A part of her is vulnerable. Outside, a crab collected by her son, Jacob, attempts to crawl out of the pail he put it in. Woolf appears uncertain of how closely to align the crab with

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<sup>28</sup> Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto.”



metaphor, risking an improper comparison, for patriarchy and its marriage is far from a beach bucket. Similarly, revolutionary change requires more than just pen and paper. In weighing her imagery of the trapped crab, Woolf asks of readers and writers imagine a world “before Man;”<sup>29</sup> to, in effect, weaponize its disruption, beginning with the meal. To tip the bucket instead of scratching at its walls.

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<sup>29</sup> Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto.”

Section Two, Mail not Male: The Letters of Peter Walsh and  
Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*

*Mrs. Dalloway* captures a split perception. She dialogues the “insane”<sup>30</sup> of Septimus Smith, a writer and WWI veteran who is haunted by visions of his dead comrade, Evans; and Clarissa Dalloway – society woman and wife of eminent parliamentarian, Richard Dalloway. Clarissa starts the novel in search of flowers for a society party she and Richard are hosting at their house; she ends it at the party, bringing folks from all over London. Peter Walsh, a “vaguely menacing”<sup>31</sup> colonial with a wife in India, has returned to London to visit his old life. He hopes to rekindle his flame with Clarissa. The novel takes the form of an Aristotelian tragedy, enduring just one day and night. This timescale is not hospitable to letters; and yet, they are here. I don’t want to overstate the epistolary’s presence – letters are few. That said, the form stands out as a tool of time-and-space distant communication in a narrative that collects its characters in a dense city delimited by twenty-four hours.

Clarissa writes Peter Walsh a letter after he visits her. I will show the letter’s resistance to Peter Walsh’s interpretation of it, and then how Septimus weaponizes these resistant strains in his own papers. In Walsh, Woolf critiques the patriarchy by satirizing its signature interpretive practice: substitution. Walsh thus attempts to box Clarissa into vague demonstratives, like “this,” “that,” and “all,” which he can *manipulate*. Walsh asks Clarissa’s letter to write itself out of existence. He is not only a hopeful chauvinist, but also a bad reader.<sup>32</sup> Walsh, as the old gentleman was in Woolf’s “A Letter to a Young Poet,” is allegorical: Donna Haraway’s “Man,” the systems that prop men up. He collects us into a society of others, of outsiders, with Clarissa when we he ejects us from his substitution. Septimus, on (or in) the other hand, develops the

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<sup>30</sup> Woolf, Virginia, and Michael Cunningham. 2021. *Mrs. Dalloway*. Vintage Books. xxi.

<sup>31</sup> Rose, Phyllis. 1978. *Woman of Letters: A Life of Virginia Woolf*. Pandora Press. 142.

letter's disruptive properties to trace new definitions for a new world without "Man." He writes papers into pure penny-posts.

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"ALL" IT TAKES

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Walsh interprets by substitution. Substitution migrates content into words of its own – a vocabulary of relative containers. It mystifies identity in phrases like 'artificial intelligence,' 'profit imperative,' and 'family values.' To continue justifying themselves, patriarchy and capitalism must be continuously ambiguated. When they are unmasked in one discourse, they devour another to sustain themselves, escaping definition and deconstruction.<sup>33</sup> Substitution is therefore also an attempt at immortality. Patriarchy and capitalism can only spend so much time running away from their desecration; their complimentary tongues will, eventually, run out of fungible language, as they will land and resources. This is where we come up against "all," against apocalyptic totality in meaning. In, say, rocketing into space while the world burns.<sup>34</sup> This section explores the system's implosion – of meaning and power – in "all," what comes after its collapse, and how Woolf's utopian-minded letters may seed a different way of living.

"After all"<sup>35</sup> follows a polemic. It's an exhale, a reduction, a negation, a redirection. "After All" transitions to what comes next, the big takeaway, or matters most, following a chunk of writing with greater particularity or detail. The phrase brushes aside in two senses: we move laterally in both time ('after') and in reading (left-to-right). As I will argue in the following

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<sup>33</sup> Klein, Naomi. 1999. *No Logo*. Picador.

<sup>34</sup> Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human Condition*. University of Chicago Press. ix.

<sup>35</sup> Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 174.

passage about Peter Walsh, the post imagines, and delivers us to “after all.” The post may see us to after “Man”’s<sup>36</sup> attempt at knowing “all,” and its apocalypse.<sup>37</sup>

The substitutive “all” puts aside the argument it dialogically depends on. “[A]ll” wants to be separate from what it sums up. If “all” is substitution, a boxing up of what was said earlier, “after all” wishes to be all and what comes after. “[A]ll” in “after all” wants to follow “after” itself. This, however, is syntactically and substantively impossible. Syntactically, “all” cannot come after itself because it *is* itself. Substantively, because, without its reference text, “all” means nothing.<sup>38</sup> “[A]ll” binges and then purges itself of this reference text to be independent of it. ‘After all, all’ produces an insatiable vacuum for meaning. “[A]ll” chokes on its own ambition to at once sum up and be more than the text that comes before it.

Walsh imagines a romance between him and Clarissa that never was; he interprets her agency as his. Clarissa's letter resists his substitution. After examining Peter's and Clarissa's epistolary exchange, I describe how the defeat of substitution charges the hotel room Walsh stays in with loneliness. Then, I will explore Septimus's “insane” letters which draft a blueprint for a world “after all,” brought about by the penny-post.

When Clarissa sends Walsh a letter after his visit, she notes that “she had never written him a letter [before] and his were dry as sticks...” (Woolf, 5). She writes Walsh a letter for the first time when he is near her, in London. Woolf asks after distance communication, vexed by proximity. The content of Clarissa's note is never revealed; Walsh assumes narratorial power: “this blue envelope; that was her hand.” So begins Walsh's deployment of the substitutive

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<sup>36</sup> Haraway, Donna. 1985. *A Cyborg Manifesto*. University of Minnesota Press, 55.

<sup>37</sup> Pun-intended: post “Man.”

<sup>38</sup> Nguyen, Viet Thahn. 2015. *The Sympathizer*. Grove Press.

demonstrative: “this” and “that” take on “blue envelope” and “her hand,” respectively. Parts of her lose their distinguishing identity for something relative to Walsh. “That” and “this” must be kept close to Walsh where “blue envelope” and “hand” are specific nouns per se. In other words, “blue envelope” and “hand” may be referenced in sentences that are not relative to Walsh. “This” and “that” are subjective containers, particular to him. Walsh continues:

And he would have to read it. Here was another of those meetings, bound to be painful. To read her letter needed the devil of an effort. ‘How heavenly it was to see him. She must tell him that’ That was all. / But it upset him. It annoyed him. He wished she hadn’t written it. Coming on top of his thoughts, it was like a nudge in the ribs. Why couldn’t she let him be? After all, she had married Dalloway, and lived with him in perfect happiness all these years (Woolf, 174).

Note that first, Walsh shunts reading into the conditional tense. He “would have to read” Clarissa’s letter. His use of the conditional tense dampens the power of “read[ing].” Walsh doesn’t have to fear reading, or “meet[ing],” Clarissa – it is a chore.

Walsh empowers his next sentence with a preposition: “to read her letter needed the devil of an effort.” Reading as part of re-membling doesn’t take a “devil of an effort.” Instead of offering a part of himself to Clarissa, who gives him a blue envelope written in her hand, Walsh makes her letter, his: “‘how heavenly it was to see him. She must tell him that.’ That was all...” Even what remains of Clarissa’s subjectivity in Walsh’s retelling resists his “devil of an effort.” It was “heavenly” to see him. She positions herself as his biblical opposite. Her letter’s feeling was heavenly. Walsh over-reads Clarissa with “a devil of an effort.”

This devil begins to develop just one sentence later. “She must tell him that.” In “that,” Walsh consolidates “heavenly it was to see him” into a single demonstrative. He migrates the letter’s content from Clarissa’s subjectivity to his own. And he goes further: “that was all.” Walsh packs “that” even more densely, with not only “heavenly it was to see him,” but the letter’s content in its entirety – including “she must tell him that.” Walsh translates Clarissa’s letter into substitutive speech. He doesn’t let the letter distinguish itself; it is relative to Walsh and so he plays “that” like his pawn. Square within his interpretative grid, “that” is subsumed into “all.” Indeed, “that was all.” If we take “was” as the past tense of “to be,” “that” becomes a part of “all.” “[A]ll” is his word. “[A]ll” assimilates Walsh’s thoughts on Clarissa’s letter with the letter’s text.

His scheme for control is, however, imperfect. This devil “upset[s] him” just one clause later. He packs too much into a single “it.” “It” is Clarissa’s letter, her subjectivity, *and* how Walsh feels about it. The “it” in “it upset him” is the same “it” that we find in his recounting of Clarissa’s letter: “How heavenly it was to see him.” “[I]t” refers to Clarissa’s subjectivity, her feeling in “it was.” “[I]t” disorders Walsh: that Clarissa might feel something other than what he reads for her. Walsh, afraid, makes another substitution: annoyed for upset. “It” goes from upsetting him to “annoy[ing].” To annoy is gentle, it’s a flirt; to upset carries real stakes. To upset, disrupts, like the letter at mealtimes. So, Walsh dulls its impact with a weaker synonym. “[I]t” is complicated with sex, too. “[I]t,” the very same subjectivity Clarissa speaks to in “heavenly to see him,” now “com[es] on top of his thoughts, it was like a nudge in the ribs.” The phrase “com[ing] on top” carries a sexual valence. “It,” Clarissa’s subjectivity, comes on top of his thoughts – she is on top, and comes. Walsh feels Clarissa’s subjectivity as a nudge in his ribs.

In an inversion of the contemporary hierarchy – she, a housewife, and he, a colonial – Clarissa is on top of Walsh’s thoughts, and inside of him. Clarissa fucks Walsh.

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THIS, THAT, AND THE OTHER THING

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“Why couldn’t she let him be?” Walsh yelps. Instead of reading as the letter asks, instead of “meetin[g],” Walsh apostrophizes. Like the “I” in *Jacob’s Room* who exclaims “is this all?”, Walsh appeals to a higher power: he wishes that Clarissa hadn’t even written him. He wishes away Clarissa’s power to write, her power to initiate a “painful meetin[g].” He twists her writing into a compulsion: she “could not let him be.” As if this was not the first letter she had ever written him. As if he wasn’t the one to visit her in London. By framing her letter in demonstratives, Walsh becomes their gravity. And then he asks them to un-write themselves. “That” and “it” burst at their seams.

Walsh consolidates “it” and “that” in “all”: “After all, she had married Dalloway, and lived with him in perfect happiness all these years.” He uses “after all,” not ‘after all of it,’ or ‘after it all.’ In other words, Walsh doesn’t even refer to time-elapsed since his romance with Clarissa as an ‘it,’ as a noun because “it” represents Clarissa’s upsetting subjectivity. “[I]t” is “all” that happened since they were last involved: time, the dispassionate courtship between Richard and Clarissa, Walsh’s own marriage and children, their lives’ past. “After all” binges “perfect happiness” and “all these years.” “All” is a history of herstory: “she had married Dalloway, and lived with him in perfect happiness all these years.” “[A]ll,” however, must know how “it,” Clarissa’s subjectivity, led her to marry Dalloway; how, in other words, her



subjectivity fell out of his orbit. And how he might pull her, and not just her letter, back into “all.” Substitution is scared of what it doesn’t know, what it hasn’t yet couched in its relative terms:

To get that letter to him by six o’clock she must have sat down and written it directly he left her; stamped it; sent somebody to the post. It was, as people say, very like her. She was upset by his visit. She had felt a great deal; had for a moment, when she kissed his hand, regretted, envied him even, remembered the possibility (for he saw her look it) [...] Yes; but there would have come a direction directly he left the room. She would be frightfully sorry for him; she would think what in the world she could do to give him pleasure (short always of the one thing), of that one line which he was going to find greeting him [...] ‘Heavenly to see you!’ And she meant it. Peter Walsh unlaced his boots (Woolf, 175).

Walsh interprets Clarissa’s haste for feeling. He believes that she “must have sat down and written it directly” to confess her love for him. “It was, as people say, very like her,” where “it” remains uncertain. If we track “it” from when Walsh first introduces Clarissa’s letter, the same “it” that contains Clarissa’s subjectivity, we watch Walsh liken Clarissa to herself. “All” is “it” – Clarissa’s upsetting subjectivity – *and* Clarissa’s likeness, “like her.” “All” is also the “people” who perceive Clarissa. Walsh catches Clarissa’s gaze between his and an amorphous “people.” He contains her in “all.” Clarissa, who “see[s],” becomes a mere “look” that Walsh “saw.”

He is free, now, to invent how she feels, and to direct those feelings towards himself: “she was upset by his visit. She had felt a great deal [...]” She feels verbatim what Walsh feels upon receiving her letter, and “would think what in the world she could do to give him pleasure.” Just short of, however, “the one thing.” Walsh never specifies what it is, though it is surely more

particular than “all.” He strings “thing” and “it” together by mirroring their parenthetical structures. What is written in inside bent brackets may be inserted and removed at will. It may be mailed out of the sentence. “It” embodies Walsh’s thwarted want for Clarissa to want him. He asks, however, for want as commodity – want as “one thing,” doubly a ‘thing’ because it’s parceled in parentheses. Walsh isn’t even sure what he wants from Clarissa, only that he wants some-thing, that “one thing,” defined by as a negative: every-thing, but. She will never, and is unable, to offer this “one thing.” Walsh posts Clarissa’s subjectivity out of this paragraph tries to tear into the contents of “one thing,” alone.

Where, or perhaps more appropriately, *when* does this leave Walsh? He makes use of two anachronisms. The first, “she must have [...] written it directly he left her,” does not make use of the modern convention in which “after” is spliced between “directly” and “he.” While this would’ve been a stylistic choice at the time, I am interested in the effect that it produces now; I clipped my sight on what feels like a grammatical crack in the sidewalk. “After” is the crack. It is into this relational gap, the unbridged distance between “directly” and “he,” that “all” falls into. What comes after “all”? Post (as in after as well as the mail) “all”? Post “all”’s apocalypse?<sup>39</sup> After substitution obliterates marginalized subjectivity? And how might we write towards a more-equitable scheme after it all comes down? Septimus will provide us with a map. And, in *Three Guineas*, an inspired Woolf writes letters towards a “Society of Outsiders.” First, however, we must see substitution to its end.

“[D]irectly” implicates with its closeness. It butts up against “he,” which invokes presence – a presence used to communicate Walsh’s absence. The link between what the

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<sup>39</sup> Hence the terrible pun in my title.

sentence says and does, dissolves. Where ‘after’ would provide some kind of bridge, there is nothing. “After” refuses to be read and denies “all,” meaning. “[A]ll” falls and shatters: “directly he left the room.” The room is empty. “[A]ll” is empty.

Walsh insists: “but it would not have been a success, their marriage. The other thing, after all, came much more naturally” (Woolf, 175). This “other thing” is a negative of another negative quantity in “one thing”; the “other thing” is a positive. That, and it’s flung out of Walsh’s orbit. The “other thing” denies Walsh his fantasy, his “all.” The “other thing” is othered from Walsh’s system and integrated into the system we share with Clarissa. The “other thing” comes directly before “after all” in the portion I quote at the beginning of the paragraph: “the other thing, after all...” “[O]ther thing” comes before in the sentence but survives “after all,” that is, the marriage between Clarissa and Richard remains after the letter. The “other thing” accepts Clarissa’s marriage as a product of her will – she chose to leave Walsh and marry Dalloway – and not patriarchy’s favorite despotism. Walsh is defeated, resigned never to “read” the letter again.

The “other thing” is not among what Walsh carries on his way to Clarissa’s party: “where was his knife; his watch; his seals; his note-case, and Clarissa’s letter which he would not read again but liked to think of [...]” (Woolf, 179). The letter as artifact, not connective tissue, is what he has left. Walsh can think of his substitution, but can’t read it in the letter, which resists him. The letter as unread artifact reminds him not of what was, not of what is (because the letter reminds him of this in its resistance to him), but what would have been. As he approaches the party, Walsh gives himself up to the meal: “And now for dinner” (Woolf, 179) Now, between life and death, is “for,” dinner. Walsh surrenders to the meal as patriarchal safety net and snare.

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## VIOLIN SOLO

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Walsh has been stalled, but not stopped. Woolf eventually “lets [Walsh] be,” and dramatizes his loneliness. He takes note of the hotel room’s material items with only his self-fragmentation for company:

for sleep, one bed; for sitting in, one arm-chair; for cleaning one’s teeth and shaving one’s chin, one tumbler, one looking-glass. Books, letters, dressing-gown, slipped about on the impersonality of the horse-hair like incongruous impertinences. And it was Clarissa’s letter that made him see all this. ‘Heavenly to see you. She must say so!’ He folded the paper; pushed it away; nothing would induce him to read it again (Woolf, 174).

The hotel room accommodates only one: supine, sitting, and freshening up. It is a sterile room dedicated to its own upkeep. The hotel room mirages immortality: it is anything but agnostic towards time. Walsh’s room cuts through time in only one direction: the future. To that end, the tumbler and the looking glass are dedicated to “cleaning one’s teeth and shaving.” This kind of preening anticipates self-presentation – at a party, a meeting, a meal. Brushing teeth and shaving stave off decay and stubble. The hotel is stale with the stink of tinctures to erase human inhabitation; to keep the space free of ghosts, to sever it from the people that pass through it and the space around it. His room wants to be an unconjugated verb. It wishes away memories like Walsh does Clarissa’s letter.

Walsh is further isolated among these things, which prepare “now[,] for dinner.” The objects in Walsh’s room create a melodrama; “books, letters, dressing gown, sli[p] about on the impersonality of the horse-hair like incongruous impertinences.” I use ‘melodrama’ – melody

and drama – because this sentence has a rhythm which invokes the whine of a violin: books, letters, and the dressing gown all slip on a horsehair, like a bow on strings. Woolf plays sordid background music. The room takes on the quality of a performance of and for just one. Walsh explains: “and it was Clarissa’s letter that made him see all this” (Woolf, 174). He has multiplied himself as first- and third person-Walsh’s in substitution. Clarissa’s letter, and Woolf’s violin accompaniment, however, shock his doubles back into one body: he is hungry – ready, now, for dinner – and alone.

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## KNIVES AND FORKS

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Septimus Smith, who characterizes Woolf’s “insanity” alongside Clarissa’s “sanity,” experiences an “insane truth” (Woolf, xxi). He accesses the role of seer so often endowed to people who experience hallucinatory mental illness. Septimus sketches, babbles, and writes in and out of death; he sees his deceased comrade, Evans, around London. This collection of writings and drawings, which are tied in silk and ready to be mailed, present possibilities for a world after Man, after the old gentleman and Peter Walsh, and how to get there. Septimus thus traces the letter’s etymology: *carte, carta, cartography*. Letter-graphs.<sup>40</sup>

Septimus looks down at the neighbor’s landing from his windowsill, contemplating a “plunge” (Woolf, 227). Behind him, doctors Holmes and Bradshaw rush up the stairs into the living room he shares with Rezia, his wife. Septimus spills his papers onto the couch and Rezia

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<sup>40</sup> Sullivan, Kelliy. 2014. “Epistolary Modernism.” Doctor of Philosophy, Boston College.

collates them. What follows is a description of the papers, their movements, and their relationships:

His papers, the things he had written, things she had written for him. She tumbled them out onto the sofa. They looked at them together. Diagrams, designs, little men and women brandishing sticks for arms, with wings – were they? – on their backs; circles traced around shillings and sixpences – the suns and stars; zigzagging precipices with mountaineers ascending roped together, exactly like knives and forks; sea pieces with little faces: the map of the world. Burn them! But Rezia laid her hands on them. Some were very beautiful she thought. She would tie them up (for she had no envelope) with a piece of silk. / Even if they took him, she said, she would go with him. They could not separate them against their wills, she said. / Shuffling the edges straight, she did up the papers, and tied the parcel almost without thinking, sitting close, sitting beside him, she thought, as if her petals were about him. She was a flowering tree; and through her branches looked out the face of a lawgiver; who had reached a sanctuary where she feared no one; not Holmes; not Bradshaw; a miracle, a triumph, the last and greatest (Woolf, 166).

I introduce this fragment by centering the papers because they unite Rezia's and Septimus's gaze; their gaze, unlike Walsh's, which entangles Clarissa in sightlines – her subjectivity, her likeness, and people – guide instead of containing. More than survival, Septimus writes a map for the world after “Man.” They look at the “things he had written, things she had written for him.” In looking, they are “together.” Where Rezia writes *for* him, Septimus's writing isn't entirely his; it is cyborg. The papers unite Septimus and Rezia towards a common point after

“Man.” Septimus directs Rezia to burn his papers. But, while their text and diagrams don’t, a description of them remains in *Mrs. Dalloway*. We may re-member them.

Rezia converts these papers into a parcel. First, she anticipates – Rezia “would tie [the papers] up (for she had no envelope) with a piece of silk.” She imagines the papers as letters but does not have an envelope. She plans to wrap them in a piece of silk. She plans all of this; none of it has yet happened. Rezia prototypes this packaging in parentheses, “(for she had no envelope).” Parentheses contain this fragment; it may, like the “other thing,” be invoked as a unit (Woolf, 175). She sends this qualification – communicating a lack of envelopes inside of a syntactic one – out of her plan to convert the papers into letters. She *will* tie up Septimus’s papers in silk, the connective tissue that guides Richard Dalloway back to Clarissa in time for her party. The silk forms a loop; the letter is connected to itself is connected to everyone; it is not just a wavering string between Richard and Clarissa, but connected to itself.<sup>41</sup> The letters’ edges are exposed, not dressed, nor addressed, in an envelope. Vulnerable, open, infinitely connected, Rezia plans to make Septimus’s papers into a letter as aesthetic, as it is set into motion by looking together: a pure penny-post.

Rezia shuffles “the edges straight, she did up the papers, and tied the parcel almost without thinking, sitting close, sitting beside him, she thought, as if all her petals were about him.” Here, Rezia follows through on her plan. She lines up each leaf, so they appear as one. She ties the parcel in silk “almost without thinking”; almost, but not quite. The motion is nearly not conscious. Thinking activates when she is aware of Septimus’s closeness: “sitting behind him.” Rezia experiences tying up the parcel without thinking until she realizes how close to Septimus

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<sup>41</sup> Like the “single spider’s web, after wavering here and there” that strings Richard Dalloway back to Clarissa (Woolf, 181).

she sits. This intimacy, sitting beside him, prompts her to “th[ink] [...] as if all her petals were about him.” Thinking brings on metaphor: her petals, his papers, are around him. She blooms and sheds about him. I will return to this image shortly.

“Diagrams, designs, little men and women brandishing sticks for arms, with wings – were they? – on their backs,” flit and curl in the air before resting on the sofa. With each comma, each substitution – diagram, designs, and little men – the fragment’s subject becomes *more* agentic. As opposed to Walsh’s substitution, Septimus’s diction depicts a passive diagram; which is replaced by a design “intended for subsequent execution,”<sup>42</sup> one that anticipates after “Man”; which is replaced by little men and women, representational figures who go on to act out the fragment’s verb. They look at the papers together. It is via this shared gaze that these diagrams turn designs turn into action, into verb. Looking together moves.

Spurred on by agentic momentum, the “men and women brandish sticks for arms.” They brandish with confidence, as if their arms aren’t just appendages, but weapons: sticks as parts of them and tools of violence. Arms may be taken to mean armaments. This kind of cyborg depiction takes another, uncertain turn when Rezia and Septimus sees “wings – were they? – on their backs [...]” These wings, made evanescent by the break “—were they? —” make for uncertain flight. Like the letter, which so freely flies between the hearth and the factory, these wings suggest greater mobility. Are these wings an imagination of perfect communication? Of simultaneity, when our letters are our wings? Septimus commits Woolf’s vision in *Jacob’s Room* to drawing: “bound together by notes and telephones we went in company.”<sup>43</sup> Seeing one’s own letter on the table is no longer an act of alienation as it is when Jacob sees his mother’s. In

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<sup>42</sup> “Design.” 2012. In *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>43</sup> Woolf, *Jacob’s Room*, 71.



Septimus's drawing, the author's letter dresses and creates lift for them like a feather. The wings which fan these feathers, however, are grammatically contingent on Septimus's depiction of sticks. "[W]ere they," dislocates the wings from "their backs," and hangs them off of their arms by way of a comma. Brandishing sticks for arms, armaments – threatening violence – like the old gentleman's war which shattered Septimus, makes lift impossible. Instead, they "tumble" – they plunge like Septimus's papers. 'Choose wings, not sticks,' makes for a strange peace-protest slogan.

Septimus's next semicolon diagrams "circles traced around shillings and sixpences – the suns and stars." The coins' exchange value is worth less than their form, their circularity. Septimus subverts capitalist logic in geometry: stars, memories of light, transfer value to the shillings and sixpences. A traced circle performs this function. Tracing a penny sounds like an elementary school exercise in art or counting. But it is in this way how we draw a backing for the coin: securities in the cosmos. Septimus associates the circles *around* the coins to the suns and stars; not necessarily the coins themselves, but their shadow or circumscription. These circles may be understood as a translation. That is, a translation of coin into script – the story, so-to-speak, of economics – that aspires to live among the suns and stars.

Septimus's penultimate diagram is of "zigzagging precipices with mountaineers ascending roped together, exactly like knives and forks." Precarity, height and falling from it, figures thematically throughout Mrs. Dalloway, whose first page pronounces: "what a lark! / What a plunge!" Septimus, too, plunges to his death. Reading Mrs. Dalloway may even be described as a plunge, one for which she primes us on the first page. These mountaineers – trailblazers, pioneers, explorers coded masculine – climb to conquer the mountain's peak, to

define themselves as above it, against a gradient of “sex-consciousness.”<sup>44</sup> “Roped together,” the mountaineers’ lives depend on their comrades. The phrase, “exactly like knives and forks,” dangles from “together.” “[T]ogether,” which modifies the expedition. So, “together,” these climbers appear as knives and forks. In their dependence on one another, cutting and poking and macerating their way to the top, they are “exactly like knives and forks.” “[E]xactly like” is an odd phrase. To be ‘like,’ or similar, precludes being ‘exact.’ “[E]xactly” clarifies ‘like’ in higher resolution. The phrase is asymptotic, approaching verisimilitude – like a reference coming close to its referent, the focus in an analog camera resolving its subject – but not quite becoming its subject. A constellation of mountaineers doesn’t inspire thoughts of tableware; this simile doesn’t resolve. Its objects of comparison are far from ‘exact.’

If the climbers, together, are “exactly like knives and forks,” are they not also tools towards breaking down, cutting, tearing apart, stabbing one’s food? What are the mountaineers eating? Aspiring towards the top, are they preparing a mountain meal? Or anticipating one? Pride, a bird’s eye vista, to stake a flag? And what is it that Septimus refers to as knives and forks – is it the shape that the climbers make, or *how* they climb the mountain? These questions distort the frame of his already tortured simile. Septimus suggests a cooption of the tools for feeding. Somewhere between the diagram of the mountaineers and its simile, He loses knives and forks as technologies of nutrition for technologies of conquer. In this scheme, there are only two options: cut and prod, “together,” towards the top of the mountain, or “plunge” to one’s death. “[T]ogether” they will get there by further dividing labor and complicating supply chains, increasingly dependent on the ropes that tie us together instead of each other. Relationships are

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<sup>44</sup> Woolf, Virginia. 1929. *A Room of One’s Own*. The Hogarth Press. 99: “It must have roused in men an extraordinary desire for self-assertion; it must have made them lay an emphasis upon their own sex and its characteristics which they would not have troubled to think about had they not been challenged”

lost for finding oneself in this knot, squeezing human form until it's nothing but an idea, an essence spat out from the body. Septimus chooses to plunge, to starve himself of fantasizing about what awaits at the top. Before he plunges, Septimus proposes an escape from this sheer binary via the letter. To reclaim forks and knives for nutrition – to stop preparing life, food, and ourselves for our tools, but prepare our tools for life, food, and ourselves. To re-rig the ropes so knives and forks connect people to people, not people to systems and things, systems of things.

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#### DEATH IN BLOOM

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Woolf says: “death was [Septimus’s] attempt to communicate.” Plunging, or in Woolf’s biographical case – drowning – are attempts at communication, a symbolic cry of anger that comes all-too-late. Septimus’s death shares in letter’s miracle from *Jacob’s Room*: attempted communication. His death, in effect, *is* a letter; Septimus delivers his papers to death, an attempt to communicate. Death publishes his papers as pure letters.

At Clarissa’s party, his death diverts attention, as is the letter’s narrative operation. She wonders: “but this man [Septimus] who had killed himself – had he plunged holding his treasure?” Treasure refers to the papers Rezia bound up as a parcel: his letters, whose contents, speech attempted, are scattered and seeded throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*. He gives us the map to find them. Septimus diagrams “sea pieces with little faces: the map of the world.” Sea pieces conjure beach vignettes, like *To the Lighthouse*. He designs “the map of the world,” not just ‘a map,’ from this imagery, putting together shorelines to trace the land’s negative.

Sitting close, Septimus likens Rezia to a “flowering tree; and through her branches looked out the face of a lawgiver; who had reached a sanctuary where she feared no one; not

Holmes; not Bradshaw; a miracle, a triumph, the last and greatest.”<sup>45</sup> Rezia is an Ovidian form: transforming from person to tree. The transformation from paper to letter and from Rezia to tree are linked; and not just materially, because paper is made of wood pulp. The tree throws leaves from its branches. Rezia’s petals, Septimus’s papers, are about him; she shares her sanctuary with Septimus. In addition to sharing space, Rezia’s petals may also be referential: they are about Septimus.

Rezia’s tree-form images that of another tree which Septimus lingers on when he walks through a public park earlier in the novel. He is marveling at one such leaf when Rezia hurries him: “it’s time,” she says. Septimus finds the “word ‘time’ [has] split its husk; poured its riches over him; and from his lips fell like shells, shavings from a plane, without his making them, hard, white imperishable words, and flew to attach themselves to an ode to time; an immortal ode to time.” Septimus’s former army captain, Evans, whom Septimus watched die on the Western Front, “answer[s] from behind [this] tree.”<sup>46</sup> The Ode is an appeal, not a question. Time splits its husk like a seed its shell. Septimus conflates an organic metaphor with a war-time one: “shavings from a plane, without his making them, hard, white, imperishable words, and flew to attach themselves to an ode to time; an immortal ode to time.” The plane flies as casings from a rifle drop from it. Septimus addresses Evans; the casings, in place of words, fall from his mouth. The bullets’ meanings explode from their brass containers. They shoot towards Evans. Evans “answers” Septimus from behind a tree.

These casings held alternatively seed kernels and bullets: a paradox. What was once inside has taken the lives of millions; what was once inside has germinated many more. What, if

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<sup>45</sup> Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 166.

<sup>46</sup> Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 77.

anything, do these impossible kernels grow? Septimus doesn't specify, but we may find direction in where their casings go. Instead of plunging to the ground, they fly "to attach themselves to an Ode to Time; an immortal ode to time." They fly to attach to an *Ode* to Time. The Ode describes Time but isn't – as Peter Walsh's substitution tries to become – Time itself.

Evans, who is dead, answers from behind a tree. That we bury our dead to fertilize new life; that bullets may doubly kill and seed; that we are doomed and hopeful take root in an enduring tree. This tree is a representative of Time itself, greater than any Ode and the casings that fly to it. An affiliation between letters, papers, petals, and leaves clarifies in Rezia's and Septimus's sitting room: "She was a flowering tree; and through her branches looked out the face of a lawgiver." Her petals are parts of her, prosthetics like the letter. Petals like leaves like leaves of paper like letters, fly off of her when she loses Septimus. The tree's branches sprout "speech attempted," various modes of communicating and re-membering. This tree anticipates after "Man" and his substitution; it is a library of different ways of knowing, thinking, reading, and writing. In her sanctuary, Rezia "fears no one," it is "a miracle, a triumph, the last and greatest." Rezia is among speech attempted, brushing against its leaves like letters. The tree is, indeed, a "miracle."<sup>47</sup> After Septimus jumps from the window, Rezia feels "like flying flowers over some tomb." Petals fly as papers tumble; they are parachutes from the mountain's plunging precarity. And they might just save us.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Woolf, *Jacob's Room*. 71

<sup>48</sup> I'm drawing, partly, the letter as aesthetic, from Scarry, Elaine. 1999. *On Beauty and Being Just*. Princeton University Press, 100: "Remembering there was a time antecedent to the institution of these laws, and recognizing also that this community will be very lucky if, in its ongoing existence through future history, there never comes an era when its legal system for a brief period deteriorates, we can perceive that ongoing work is actively carried out by the continued existence of a locus of aspiration: the evening skies, the dawn chorus of roosters and mourning doves, the wild rose that, with the sweet pea, uses even prison walls to climb on."

## PARANOID READING

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Peter Walsh may be a patriarchal reader. And a bad one. But in reading him as symbolic, as part of a patriarchal superstructure and its logics, am I a paranoid reader? Am I reading for something that isn't there? Am I substituting patriarchy for one man? Recommitting Walsh's logic of substitution in my own reading of him? Signifying him, and his letters, more than is justified? Do I write as if the subject's shadow is more important than herself qua herself?

Paranoia bubbles beneath *Mrs. Dalloway*. It erupts from Woolf's pen, controlled for much of the novel, in the scene with doctors Holmes and Bradshaw, stalking Septimus. And it is paranoia – terror in error, in being unable to anticipate what they might do to him – that pushes Septimus off of the sill and onto his neighbor's fence.

Walsh, living in the shadow of "Man," is, without question, a paranoid reader by Eve Sedgwick's stick. His paranoia has a "unidirectionally future-oriented vigilance," and a "relation to temporality that borrows both backward and forward: because there must be no mad surprises, and because of learning the possibility of a bad surprise would itself constitute a bad surprise, paranoia requires that bad news be always already known."<sup>49</sup> Walsh stores his future in the past: his romantic future with Clarissa is nostalgia. This paradox in reading is characteristic of paranoia. 'Paradox' and 'paranoid' locate themselves above the text (para-text): one is above, playing in doxa, or domain of opinion or belief per Plato, and the other is *noos*: mind. The mind formulates opinions; paranoia thinks paradox. And all of this happens above the text, not in reading it. Walsh is a bad reader because he doesn't read – he is above the text.

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<sup>49</sup> Sedgwick, Eve. 2002. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You." In *Touching Feeling*. Duke University Press. 130.

Are these letters swelling? Are my readings of them tendentious and selective ones? I am, after all, an undergraduate – the thesis is an exercise, and incomplete. To be strong, a theory, argues Sedgwick through Silvan Thompkins, must be weak.<sup>50</sup> The strong theory doesn't make room for contradiction. Its strength comes out of its scale. In its ambition, the strong theory makes many paradoxes. To be a man, a patriarch, is a strong theory. Capitalism is a strong theory. So: am I making the letters to be more than they are? A strong theory to make up for the dearth of academic literature on Woolf's fictional letters? Are Woolf scholars correct in not pursuing her fictional letters as a critical inquiry? And why am I asking this of you, mom? Why do you care? Am I padding my argument by asking these questions? And thus goes a string of paranoid inquiries. Am I revealing the institutions that produced me, a hungering anorexic, or my own pathologies? Am I saying what I want to say, or something different? Yes, and, counters Sedgwick. One must know paranoia to imagine a world without it.

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<sup>50</sup> Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading." 133.

## Section Three, A Society of Outsiders: Writing Fictional Letters For a Better World



A war from above bombed Virginia and Leonard's Hogarth Press in 1940. At first, this war seemed like the last: across the border and entrenched. But it inched closer by sound: the buzz of planes, air-raid sirens, anxious babble about politics. She and Leonard had been living outside of London; Leonard, Virginia's husband and primary caretaker, insisted that they stay outside of the city's churn so as not to provoke one of Virginia's episodes. She had, by that point, already attempted suicide twice.

In 1938, Woolf wrote an epistolary anti-war treatise, *Three Guineas*. I will attribute the letters' authorship to Woolf, as she gives no pseudonym to whom we may attach them. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf plays with scale. She names "patriarch[y],"<sup>51</sup> decades before the term became popular during the Second Wave Feminism, and makes it speak through one man: a barrister. She communicates with Donna Haraway's "Man"<sup>52</sup> through *a* man. Woolf notes that the letter "may be unique in the history of human correspondence, since when before has an educated man asked a woman in her opinion how war can be prevented?"<sup>53</sup> Her question smacks of irony, as no man – biographically speaking – ever asks Woolf this question. And yet, she writes a book-length response, which furnishes no answer at all, because to do so, she argues, would bend to patriarchal logic like substitution. Substitution, that is, in *Mail not Male*, Peter Walsh's analytical mode which shunts description into opaque, verbal containers of his own. She rejoinders men and their uniforms and their war games and their societies with disinterest. Woolf colors this man, a barrister, in: "the hair is no longer thick on the top of your head. You have reached the middle years of your life not without effort, at the Bar; but on the whole your journey has been

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<sup>51</sup> Woolf, Virginia. 1938. *Three Guineas*. Hogarth Press. 135.

<sup>52</sup> Haraway, Donna. 1985. *A Cyborg Manifesto*. University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>53</sup> Woolf, *Three Guineas*. 8.

prosperous” (Woolf, 8). She goes on to estimate the peaks and troughs of his life: remarkable in its upper-class mediocrity. For him, considering war and peace is an entitlement; *this* is Woolf’s battle. Women, locked out of the university, rattle its fences. Men bolster them. Woolf, aghast, writes: “is that not enough? [...] [D]o they not prove that education, the finest education in the world, does not teach people to hate force, but to use it?” (Woolf, 54).

The fictional letter is Woolf’s mode of choice in *Three Guineas*. As opposed to other forms, it can imagine a “society of outsiders” and cyborg forms of communication, speech attempted, disinterested in war. She begins: “I had hoped that [your letter] would answer itself, or that other people would answer it for me” (Woolf, 7). Other people, however, are just that: other. They aren’t party to Woolf’s two-node correspondence. A letter cannot answer itself, as Woolf suggests. For the letter to call on itself recursively, arranging iteratively smaller permutations of its own words, would carry out Peter Walsh’s wish for Clarissa’s letter to undo itself in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Perhaps Woolf intends *the* answer to be no answer at all.

The feverish geopolitics of the 1930s, motivated by the narrative regimes of nationalism, chronological history, and economics – and their invented subjects in patriots, citizens, and consumers – bring fictional tales relatively closer to lived experience during wartime, and certainly closer than the ‘nonfiction’ that asserts objectivity. These arrogant, nonfictional genres make claims to unqualified speech. Fiction is truthful in disclosing not-so-truthful subjects, in its “speech attempted.” ‘Man’ is more-easily understood *as* a fiction, addressed by fictional letter. Woolf says of Il Duce and Hitler: “it is the *figure* of a man; others deny, that he is Man himself, the quintessence of virility, the perfect type of which all the others are imperfect adumbrations” (Woolf, 257, italics, mine). Others live in a shadow to the figure. “Other” people are significant for what they are not: not a part of Woolf’s letter, belittled by figure of Man. *Three Guineas*

exemplifies the power of writing fictional letters when the world is so dreadful that hope takes the form of imagining a new one. She entrusts to the form topics like fascism, patriarchy, capitalism, and war and peace; the letter breaks from the world, and into time-agnostic space, to re-member oneself, and oneself in a new world, before re-entering the existing one. Woolf multiplies this effect in her meta-fictional letters. To her own “society of outsiders” (Woolf, 213), Woolf wants to bring “other[ed] people,” who refuse to answer the barrister’s question, men and women, with her and leave ‘Man,’ systems like capitalism and patriarchy that prop men up, behind.<sup>54</sup>

Woolf is one woman with an ambition to uplift “all people.” To do this, she first “experiments” (Woolf, 213). In this chapter, I will elaborate her experimentation in four sections: eating and abstention; a physical render of time-agnostic space in the “bridge” (Woolf, 112); the photograph as argumentative form; and a discussion of meta-letters.

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## EATING AND ABSTENTION

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She may not answer the barrister’s question, but Woolf *does* develop an antidote to Peter Walsh’s mode of substitution in her use of irony. It’s an irony she inflects with humor and great political significance: saying one thing and doing another is, in fact, how she evades the shadow of the ‘Man’ and his war. Woolf makes use of structural irony: heightening the difference

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<sup>54</sup> Woolf displays a similar affection for the “other” in *Mrs. Dalloway*, when the “other thing” endures Peter Walsh’s fantasy. Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*. 175.

between what the words are saying and how she says them, to confuse Walsh's logic of substitution and suggest "experiments" (Woolf, 213) in living.

In his essay "On Eating, and Preferring Not To," Adam Phillips, a psychoanalyst, describes a patient's anorexia as an "experiment in living."<sup>55</sup> The essay's title refers to Herman Melville's "Bartleby," read in conjunction with Phillips's casework. Contrary to psychological convention, which imagines anorexia as a flirt with death<sup>56</sup>, Phillips reframes anorexia as a hunger for more hunger: for a will to eat and live. The anorexic is so hungry for hunger, for life, or want of it, that they starve. More than half-a-century before Phillips's book of essays, *Promises, Promises*, Woolf complicates his "experiment in living" in *Three Guineas*:

"The fact that immense amount of work is done by the daughters of educated men without pay or for very little pay need not be taken as a proof that they are experimenting of their own free will in the psychological value of poverty. Nor need the fact that many daughters of educated men do not "eat properly" serve as proof that they are experimenting in the physical value of undernourishment. Nor need the fact that a very small proportion of women compared with men accept honours to be held prove that they are experimenting in the virtues of obscurity" (Woolf, 210).

She warns against ascribing merit to changing one's form – hiding within the folds of one's fat, or trying to disappear into the ridges of one's ribs – as we so often do with the honors that men receive. "Many such experiments," Woolf continues, "are forced experiments and therefore of no

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<sup>55</sup> Phillips, Adam. 2001. "On Eating and Preferring Not To." Basic Books. 292

<sup>56</sup> DSM-V, 341: "The nutritional compromise associated with this disorder affects most major organ systems and can produce a variety of disturbances. Physiological disturbances, including amenorrhea and vital sign abnormalities, are common. While most of the physiological disturbances associated with malnutrition are reversible with nutritional rehabilitation, some, including loss of bone mineral density, are often not completely reversible."

positive value. But others of a much more positive kind are coming daily” (Woolf, 210). Of these “positive” experiments, Woolf insists that they take place apart from ‘Man’ In being defined as other from Man, Woolf encourages experimentation in ways that celebrate being othered, with others. She cites games of women’s football and a union’s refusal to knit socks for the war effort (Woolf, 210).

Woolf lists three scruples: psychological value, physical value, and the virtue of obscurity. She asks that we don’t mistake the actions of individual women for allegory. “Value[s]” are myths are spun out of individual resistance, and not “proof” per se of their existence. The maintenance of virtue, the maintenance of womanhood, starts to look a lot like the maintenance of ‘Man.’ These are “forced experiments.” Narrative is not a stand-in for autonomy; it is a forced “experiment” in it: replicable and controlled.<sup>57</sup>

Little is taken for granted in Woolf’s “society of outsiders.” She says, “the daughters of educated men have always done their thinking from hand to mouth; not under green lamps at study tables in the cloisters of secluded colleges” (Woolf, 114). “[H]and to mouth” is a tongue-and-cheek phrase. It is spare. It is a banal movement – a hand directed to one’s mouth. As if the two are not members of the same body. Does Woolf render an image of a stifled voice, of a hand covering one’s mouth? Or is it an image of feeding oneself with one’s fingers instead of knives and forks? A nutrition that is gentle, blunt, fleshy. The alternative, patriarchal mode to “thinking” as action sits still, “under green lamps at study tables in the cloisters of secluded colleges.”

Where Woolf’s image of the woman is singular and stifled, men are many and unquestioning.

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<sup>57</sup> I am writing a partially personal account: the anorexic, for example, recovers agency by making herself a narrative subject, and not the operated-upon object. When the anorexic starves, they are in control: what comes in and out of their body is subject to extreme regulation. They endow food with “physical value,” make food an extension of their will. Starving oneself has physical value only inasmuch as it reminds them that they are physical, that they live in a body. And they will die in one, too.

They are afforded everything, but don't move from "under green lamps at study tables" in the "cloisters of secluded colleges." Woolf ironizes, again: the sentence intends to show how men are privileged to move through the world over women. But she shows them, idle. Women are hungry. Men are satiated. Woolf suggests a mode of "thinking" that hungers. In a "society of outsiders," women may think and eat, without 'Man.'

Mr. Joad, one of Woolf's meta-epistolary creations, writes about being a working husband:

[I]f they cannot learn to save men from the destruction which incurable male mischievousness bids fair to bring upon them, let women at least learn to feed them, before they destroy themselves. [...] You are extremely idle; and so given over to the eating of peanuts and ice cream that you have not learnt to cook him a dinner before he destroys himself, let alone how to prevent that fatal act (Woolf, 79).

"[M]ale mischievousness" is a static property, one that, like men in the university library under their green lamps, doesn't move. Mr. Joad opens with a contingency: "if they cannot [...]." He issues a demand, predicting its failure to be met. As if women aren't already furnished, at best, a consolation narrative, Mr. Joad writes as if it is *he* who is compensated too little. If Woolf can't save him from himself, then she should at least learn to "feed" him. He accuses women of indulging in "peanuts and ice cream." They have "given over" to food, even though it is the men who fatten up and fight because they refuse to renegotiate their egos and rapacity. Mr. Joad subordinates feeding men to preventing war: if women cannot move idle men, then she should sustain them to their deaths. Mr. Joad is somewhere between a toad and a goad – a prod, a prick. He is the figure of 'Man.' Free from Mr. Joad and his ilk, Woolf's "society of outsiders" and

their “experiments” make a negative of utopia: a real place that is everywhere but where ‘Man’ is. Everywhere but, ironically, is a real place.

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## THE BRIDGE

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I’ve invented and used throughout sections one and two, a ‘time-agnostic space.’ A space that isn’t, really, a space at all, but a phrase that recalls something like it: a shared experience in which letter-writer and letter-reader exchange parts of themselves. Woolf writes another transitory space into *Three Guineas* that similarly negotiates the old world and the new one. Like ‘time-agnostic space,’ the bridge presents an impasse, a break, from ‘Man.’ ‘Time-agnostic space’ is one of dynamic possibilities. Woolf says, “we are here, on the bridge, to ask ourselves certain questions. And they are very important questions; and we have very little time in which to answer them” (Woolf, 112). She situates us as she does at the beginning of *Three Guineas*: with questions. In this way, the bridge imitates the letter in *Three Guineas* because the letter, too, positions us to “ask certain questions,” and reply to them, if not answer them. On the bridge, we – and the three letters of *Three Guineas* – are suspended between past and future. Woolf continues:

Behind us lies the patriarchal system; the private house, with its nullity, its immortality, its hypocrisy, its servility. Before us lies the public world, the professional system, with its possessiveness, its jealousy, its pugnacity, its greed. The one shuts up like slaves in a harem; the other forces us to circle, like caterpillars head to tail, round and round the mulberry tree, the sacred tree, of property. It is a choice of evils. Each is bad. Had we not

better plunge off the bridge into the river; give up the game; declare the whole of human life is a mistake and so end it? (Woolf, 135)

While the bridge is a generative space, a tool for reflection and reconstruction based on lessons learned (looking into the river, never the same, to see one's reflection), it is also impermanent. One can't make a life in a space of exchange, of transition. Woolf writes herself as moving away from antique notions of gender inequality towards a technologically-motivated future, where we all – no matter our gender identity – take on an inhuman quality of caterpillars. The new world is sleeker, even in its cultish worship of property and profit, but nonetheless cruel. "It's a choice of evils." Woolf sees progress migrating from private to public; from the home to the factory. The private house takes on "nullity," "immortality," "hypocrisy," and "servility." It shuts up its inhabitants "like slaves in a harem." First it is null, empty, a placeholder. Null, appropriately, is the first in a list of four things that the private house purports to be. The private house is this and then that and then this and then that, an enumeration that, instead of adding meaning, tears at it. "With" places the "private house" alongside what is supposed to describe it. While "servility" may imply an unbroken hierarchy within the private house, Woolf's sentence takes on no such organization. It is "hypocrisy." The form is not strictly hierarchical, but neither is it equal, as "with" does not carry to each item in the list. Woolf's list merely *is*, drifting from 'private house.' Following null, the private house is immortal. It has no meaning to pass on, no legacy. 'Private house' floats free of time's typical corruption. The patriarchy calls on its myth without revising it. Living in the private house is to be "shut up." If not locked, the private house can hold no meaning – hold no family. It is a "forced experiment." The private house, without such force is nothing more than a network of semiotic prostitution – a "harem." It means whatever the patriarchy, or ruling class, wants it to mean, sold to the highest bidder. What the 'private house'



and its family means in any political moment is a lot like cheap sex. I can almost hear Woolf snickering.

New-age productivity, on the other hand, bends Woolf and her comrades into a worship circle. They are like “caterpillars head to tail, round and round the mulberry tree, the sacred tree, of property.” Her sentence rings like a nursery rhyme; in fact, it’s derived from one about a mulberry bush.<sup>58</sup> Why does Woolf select a tree as opposed to a bush? Why caterpillars and not some other kind of fauna? Why do they make a circle? Round and round makes profit-worship sound like play. As if this world is a “game,” whose prize is extinction all the same for winners and losers. Woolf and her readers spin centripetally. “Tree” and “property” share a rhyming affinity. The circle marches head to tail in an approximation of cycles: lifecycles, production cycles. They are “forced to circle” by a godlike-foreman’s coercion. The caterpillars circle, they trace the tree of property, just as Septimus “traces” the suns and stars with coins in *Mrs. Dalloway*.<sup>59</sup> There is an economic aspiration to the cosmos: to align a productive order with the natural one. The stars share a shape with coins share a shape with the caterpillars around the tree of property.

Woolf forces caterpillars around a tree, common fauna and flora synonymous with millions of our non-human kin, to act out economics’ drama of scarcity. As if the economy, in essence a circular discipline which makes models and issues fiat to ensure its own continuance, actually underpins natural order. As if the cosmos took our abstractions of human behavior and used them to inform its own phenomena. Woolf thus takes the ‘Man’s’ logic to its extreme. These caterpillars never mature; they remain larvae, who won’t lose productive time to making a

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<sup>58</sup> “Here we go round the mulberry bush, / The mulberry bush, / The mulberry bush. / Here we go round the mulberry bush / On a cold and frosty morning.”

<sup>59</sup> Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*. 166.

cocoon so they may fly free. Why comprehend the irony, the beauty, the joy in wrapping oneself in silk for weeks in order to fly away, when the stunted caterpillars make a perfectly compliant workforce? Eager, too, to blindly consume the leaves, letters written in bitter words economics and like disciplines of substitution, proffered by this mulberry tree. And why resist any effort to shrink that potential pool from the larvae with different phenotypic presentations? In this way the new public realm differs from the private house. It tears down social restrictions because the tree of property discriminates only by how much value it can extract from its encircling bugs.

Whatever Woolf's jaunty mulberry tree jingle may lead us to believe, this game is no fun: "had we not better plunge off the bridge into the river; give up the game; declare the whole of human life is a mistake and so end it?" (Woolf, 135). Woolf does away with the caterpillars for "human life." It is as if invoking "human life" makes her reluctant to throw one, herself, into the river. No item in the list is complete enough to punctuate a full sentence. The caterpillar scene haunts Woolf's clause about suicide: there is more freedom in a butterfly's flight than in falling. By writing, contemplating on the bridge, a formal chrysalis, transforming oneself in a place of mutual exchange, we find an alternative to drowning in our reflection. With the letter, we may write our way off of the bridge.

The bridge is potentiality: "in imagination we can see the educated man's daughter, as she issues from the shadow of the private house, and stands on the bridge which lies between the old world and new, and as she twirls the sacred coin in her hand, "what shall I do with it? What shall I see with it?" "[T]he educated man's daughter [...] issues" from the house. A magazine and a letter are issued: filed and mailed. Not a person, but their writerly production; this woman is of Woolf's pen. While the educated man's daughter stands on the bridge, she considers how to avoid shedding one hegemony for another. That is, how to no longer be known as the daughter of

an educated man, in his shadow, and also how to walk, matching her stride to the march around the mulberry tree, in *its* prickly shade. The coin animates in two ways: ‘doing’ and ‘seeing.’ To act out one’s own verb and to witness take on equal weight. She activates ‘doing’ and ‘seeing’ by ‘twirling,’ by dancing as opposed to a banal circling of the mulberry tree. Twirling defies. And ‘doing’ and ‘seeing’ appear to her as open questions, like those which inspire her to ruminate on the bridge at the beginning of this section. Woolf trades in letters, not coins. One letter for each guinea. She buys ‘doing’ and ‘seeing.’ The bridge an ‘time-agnostic space’ facilitate ‘doing’ and ‘seeing’ without mercenary intention.

Woolf traces another symmetry between the bridge and the fictional letters that make up her anti-war treatise: “[l]et us therefore turn from our station on the bridge across the Thames to another bridge over another river, this time in one of the great universities; for both have rivers, and both have bridges, too, for us to stand upon” (Woolf, 43). The bridge isn’t just one, it is many. Its break comes just as Woolf finishes one letter to start another. There are bridges for every present. We just have to write our way to them, and then once more, write from them.

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## PHOTOGRAPHS

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Bound with her letters, photographs inform Woolf’s experiments.<sup>60</sup> They capture a spirit Chris Kraus would later write in *Aliens & Anorexia*: “[e]ternal beatitude is a state where to look is to eat.”<sup>61</sup> Kraus’s eternal beatitude is cast out from us. To behold something, we must hold it at

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<sup>60</sup> See Figure 1

<sup>61</sup> Kraus, Chris. 2000. *Aliens and Anorexia*. MIT Press. 166.

arm's length. Food does not meet our mouths. For Kraus, ideal consumption isn't consumption at all; creativity doesn't create – build a body – but is, instead, imagined. This illusion, and its beauty, *is* our nutrition. We take it in by looking at it, by translating visual data into aesthetic. This nutrition, however, stops at sight.

For Woolf, the photograph is “simply [a] statemen[t] of fact addressed to the eye” (Woolf, 20). While she eventually arrives at the photograph as mnemonic device, one that assists in re-membling, the photograph is, first, a pure address to the eye. It is not yet a cyborg form, but a dislocated one: the eye severs from the body. The statement of fact's recipient is a mere sensory bundle, which computes the photograph as a statement of fact, held apart from the rest of the body. When it's connected to the brain and nervous system, however, seeing the photograph as fact mixes with memory and fiction: “The system sends messages in a flash through every past memory and present feeling. When we look at these photographs some fusion takes place within us; however different the education, the traditions behind us, our sensations are the same; and they are violent” (Woolf, 21). The violence is in partitioning sensory experience, singling out – severing – an organ that signifies subjectivity. The photograph restrains its subject and holds its focus; education, sensation, and tradition blur. Objective reality, or that which purports to be it, only reproduces the violence it depicts without the softening of memory and feeling, memory of feeling.<sup>62</sup> Woolf continues: “though we see the same world, we see it through different eyes” (Woolf, 34). Though and through share an assonance. Though pivots, augments, qualifies: “‘we see the world,’ but.’ Through as in through a substrate. We all see the world through eyes, though. The same world is stimuli; the addition of ‘r’ turns this though into a through, a way of understanding, of moving in the world. Instead of trying to assemble a pure

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<sup>62</sup> Sontag, Susan. 1990. *On Photography*. Anchor Books.

“though,” “through” suggests motion, an partial and colorful understanding. To divine evidence for how the world works while sitting under a green lamp in the university library,<sup>63</sup> is to focus on though instead of practicing through. Though partitions seeing and experience: it simplifies, or severs, one’s eye from the rest of their body.

Our experience is “the same” in that we are all unable to access others’ subjectivities. The photograph doesn’t inspire us to violence but illuminates the boundaries of private and public persons: “the colored photograph we have been looking at presents some remarkable features, it is true; but it serves to remind us that there are many inner and secret chambers that we cannot enter” (Woolf, 41). Woolf’s modification of “remarkable features” also looks like a list; the colored photograph presents some remarkable features. *And* it is true. But only insofar as the “statemen[t] of fact” stops short at the eye. To this end, the photographs Woolf presents to us as “colored,” are not. Woolf’s photos are black and white. She leaves it to us to color them in, like the “color[ing]”<sup>64</sup> she suggests in “A Letter to a Young Poet.” The statements of fact are black and white. They “serve to remind us that there are many inner and secret chambers that we cannot enter.” Chambers inside of us? Or in other people? In our perception, or theirs? Where are these chambers, physiologically? Perhaps somewhere deep in one’s gut. Or, perhaps, in their eye – which keeps to itself pure statements of fact. The photograph is jealous: it demands access to the damp, windowless chambers where we store unseen education, sensations, and tradition.

Woolf cautions that “our bird’s eye view of the outside of things is not altogether encouraging” (Woolf, 41). It may be helpful to add to the natural metaphor Woolf sets up in her nursery rhyme: where, if at all, does the bird fit into our ecosystem of the caterpillar and the tree?

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<sup>63</sup> How ironic, I think as I write. My lamp isn’t green, it’s aluminum and from Target.

<sup>64</sup> “[A] good letter-reader takes the color of the reader at the other end, that from reading the one we can imagine the other.”

Is the bird a predator? Or, maybe, the threat of one: the caterpillars are surveilled in their property worship; they are soon to be eaten. Surely this strange *Alice in Wonderland*-type world is part of Woolf's ironic register; a warning, perhaps, against investing too much power in the photograph. A warning against the photograph *as* a letter instead of *with* a letter. It will poach us from our prayer. The world as fact addressed to the eye is a violent one; one of dislocations and jealousy and violent portions. To see the world as from above is to lose all ground feel – connection to Earth and what lives on it. To fly, and see with a bird's eye, makes a mirage of objectivity: data, and not how we feel about them. Warplanes bomb by bird's eye. There must, however, be another way: a way to read, to color in, *and* to integrate photographs as statements of fact. A way off the bridge, a life raft, that the *fictional* letter presents to us.

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## SIMULATION

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Woolf is not a nihilist, but she is certainly a skeptic. Value, to her, isn't intrinsic. Woolf asks after the motive of objectivity, and in it, finds that for all its talk about knowing itself, reality itself, it has failed to ask why its standards are prohibitively high for women – why if one is a woman, objectivity will not lend them its name:

you have to strip each statement of its money motive, of its power motive, of its advertisement motive, of its publicity motive, of its vanity motive, let alone all the other motives as an educated man's daughter, are familiar to you, before you make up your mind which fact about politics to believe, or even which opinion about art? (Woolf, 175)

Woolf imagines a ‘psychometer,’ a contraption that will tell you the value of someone’s wealth, say, when you hold it up to a rich man (Woolf, 147). Not their net worth, no. But the wealth’s spiritual import. Its “desirab[ility]” (Woolf, 147). Such a device, I need not say, never existed. Writing about the tool, however, points to the absurdity in trying to measure an objective value, and where the progress narrative fails its impossible task from the start. To experiment is to mix these values in solution. In “through.” Motive, as opposed to a static value, suggests movement. Stripping away these motives takes away that which moves them, by “though,” whereas to make subjectivity out of the light collected from a camera lens *and* one’s thoughts, spilled onto the page of a personal letter, is to see “through.” Making up one’s mind is an act of construction, not stripping. And the building materials aren’t locked within us.

Woolf offers one last guinea, not for its monetary value, but for its symbol:

take this one guinea then and use it to assert “the rights of all – all men and women – to the respect in their persons of the great principles of Justice and Equality and Liberty.”

Put this penny candle in the window of your new society, and may we live to see the day when the blaze of our common freedom, the words tyrant and dictator shall be burnt to ashes, because the words tyrant and dictator shall be obsolete (Woolf, 187).

The letter as guinea as exchange value, diverts. To hoard the letter, as with guineas, is avarice just the same. It is a tool that amplifies, that “assert[s]”; it isn’t determined by a coagulant of bond values, employment metrics, price indices, and other economic euphemisms. By “assert[ing],” the guinea is no longer in a relationship with itself and all of the machinery that measures this relationship, but in a relationship to people: “the rights of all – all men and women – to the respect of their persons.” Woolf invests this guinea in the social. She tells her readers to place our “penny candle in the window of our new society.” Is the penny different from the

guinea? Or do they make reference to the same coin? Does relating the guinea to people, and not other instruments or measures of productivity, change its name or coinage? Its name sharing half of Woolf's democratic "penny-post"<sup>65</sup>? This coin, the same that "blaze[s]" in our windows, pays for our letters. The guinea is not just a penny, however, it is a "penny candle." How does this compare to the penny-post? Both burn. The penny candle, however, is put on display for all to see; the penny-post burns to keep correspondence intimate. They are tools to light and write this new society of outsiders.

Because they are obsolete, the words "tyrant and dictator" (Woolf, 187) shall be burnt to ashes. Woolf plays with the properties of redux reactions: the words aren't obsolete because they're burnt to carbon, and one can't speak or write ash, but are burnt because they are obsolete. Obsolescence is her input, and her output, ashes. What is the letter if not obsolete after it has been burnt? Instead, Woolf makes obsolescence a precondition to burning "words." The tyrant and the letter, one mode of resistance against the tyrant, must no longer have use to be burnt.<sup>66</sup> This scene takes place after "all," when simultaneous communication mixes fact and fiction like the winged figures in Septimus's papers. In her inverted obsolescence, Woolf portrays a rebirth of language in the hearth of her society of outsiders: words shake off the letter's ashes to be associated and re-membered anew.

Apart from men and their war, Woolf refuses to take moral responsibility for their brutality: "we can best help you to prevent war not by repeating your words and following your methods but by finding new words and creating new methods" (Woolf, 260). By crossing new bridges, by burning penny candles and writing penny-posts, Woolf postures a radical disinterest:

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<sup>65</sup> Woolf, Virginia. 1931. "A Letter to a Young Poet," 1931.

<sup>66</sup> For the record: neither is obsolete. Yet.



“we can best help you to prevent war not by joining your society but by remaining outside your society but in co-operation with its aim” (Woolf, 260). She refers to an anti-war social club for men. A society within a society. Woolf counts herself out of this in-group just as she counts herself out of ‘Man’s’ society. She is other.

Woolf writes this nesting doll scheme into the scale of her book: fictional letters within fictional letters, experimenting in what she might say, and how her recipient might respond. If we can understand what these works of meta-fiction do for her fiction, we might understand what her fiction is trying to do for her readers. Woolf’s metafictional letters alienate themselves from fictional fact, that which the world their author takes as real. They suspend us within our suspension of disbelief. ‘Man’ is a fiction, which creates brutal realities. Its impact is measurable, but its story is not. Fiction, and in particular, fictional letters, let Woolf confront Il Duce and Hitler on the same, fictional ground. Her letters treat ‘Man’ to its own confused logics. Fiction as experiment, joined with nonfiction and the photograph, finds more success than exclusive nonfiction in dis-membering the hold ‘Man’ has on our bodies and their nutrition. Alone, the photograph is violent. And, alone, fiction is not taken seriously.

Woolf’s metafictional letters elaborate on her fictional ones. “Here, then, is an attempt,” she writes with a colon, followed by a metafictional letter, an imagined reply. She asks us to “risk it and draft a letter to her, laying down the terms upon which she shall have our money to help to rebuild her college” (Woolf, 57). The metafictional letter is a risk; she attempts speech in it. It is a “miracle,”<sup>67</sup> attempting speech and furnishing lessons for her fictional ones. The metafictional letter negotiates a meta-bridge between a text’s private-house assumptions and its

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<sup>67</sup> Woolf, *Jacob’s Room*. 71.

narrative march towards progress. Woolf's fictional letters do the same for our lived realities. We must other ourselves, a prosthetic part of ourselves, in order to read and write about ourselves in the world. And then re-member ourselves upon re-entering it. To write a fictional letter is to write a third way off the bridge: flight in experimentation and re-membering. *Three Guineas* is Woolf's final plea for us to join her in building a society of outsiders, of others who write, before war breaks out across her continent and the world. If only we'd replied, then.

## Coda: On Eating One's Grief

*“She had taken too much from her mother, done too little, given too little love in return, and her mother had died. Unworthy of sustenance, she punished herself by refusing to eat.”* -Phyllis Rose, *A Woman of Letters*, 115.

My first year, Professor Jordan Kirk, who taught the English major survey class, extolled Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* as a most-perfect novel and redirected our analytical energies towards writing a creative pastiche. A critical treatment, it was implied, would only degrade the text by our novitiate scrutiny. It is under this admonition that I have begun my most-ambitious critical project yet. Auspicious, no?

Allie Glenny, whom I reference in my opening letter, wrote what I believe to be the only comprehensive study of Woolf’s fictive and non-fictive relationship to food and eating in *Ravenous Identity: Eating and Eating Distress in the Life and Work of Virginia Woolf*. The book speaks to Woolf’s life as a love affair with and all-consuming fear of food. Tracing Woolf’s pathology to traumatic sexual abuse by her suave Duckworth stepbrothers; her mother’s death when she was ten; and her time in sanitoriums, where doctors prescribed “copious meals and large amounts of mindless activity”<sup>68</sup> to redirect energies from her genius to her womb; Glenny locates a deeply mad woman – not in commonly (and critically) misconstrued ‘insane’ madness, but in anger. At her half-brothers. At her doctors. At ‘Man.’ At the whole damned world.

Woolf sought her mother’s attention via illness, modeling the relationship between Julia and Leslie Stephen, whose exhausting demands on his wife’s emotional bandwidth, argues

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<sup>68</sup> Glenny, Allie. 1999. *Ravenous Identity: Eating and Eating Distress in the Life and Work of Virginia Woolf*. St. Martin’s Press. 21.

Phyllis Rose reading *To the Lighthouse*, spelled Julia's youthful demise.<sup>69</sup> Woolf testifies in her diary, "[Leslie's] life would have entirely ended mine."<sup>70</sup> In battling mental illness and doctors' orders, Woolf attempted suicide twice and fluctuated her weight, often settling where her bones sharpened and poked and her cheeks sunk.<sup>71</sup>

Chiaroscuro, fingers of light against the dark, stand out – as one might expect – in a novel with 'Lighthouse' in its title. Mr. Ramsey, comparing himself to the enormity of Shakespeare, and to Shakespeare, the glacial immortality of a rock, imagines time as a cosmic visual: "his own little light would shine, not very brightly, for a year or two, and then would be merged into some bigger light, and then that in bigger still" (Woolf, 35). Light appeals to Woolf's word for androgynous genius: "incandescent."<sup>72</sup> People and their cultural contributions will be combined and recombined into a burning ball of gas. Later, in "Time Passes," Mrs. Ramsey appears to Mrs. McNab, the vacant beach home's caretaker, as a "yellow beam or a circle at the end of a telescope" (Woolf, 136). Mrs. Ramsey, who we learn has died in brackets just a few paragraphs earlier – a parenthetical whisper that reaches Mrs. McNab by a game of telephone – follows her in sight's periphery: "a lady in a gray cloak, stooping over her flowers, went wandering over the bedroom wall, up the dressing table, across the wash stand [...]" (Woolf, 136). Like the lighthouse's wandering beam, Mrs. Ramsey haunts her home. She emanates.

After dinner at the end of the novel's first section, "The Window," the Ramsey children are sent to bed. Mrs. Ramsey quietly turns the knob to James's and Cam's Room. She enters to find them awake. Cam could not sleep, she says, because the boar's skull over her bed cast its

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<sup>69</sup> Rose, Phyllis. 1978. *Woman of Letters: A Life of Virginia Woolf*. Pandora Press. 159.

<sup>70</sup> Rose, *Woman of Letters*. 159.

<sup>71</sup> Glenny, Allie. 1999. *Ravenous Identity: Eating and Eating Distress in the Life and Work of Virginia Woolf*. St. Martin's Press.

<sup>72</sup> Woolf, Virginia. 1929. *A Room of One's Own*. The Hogarth Press. 98.

“horns [...] all over the room. Wherever they put the light (and James could not sleep without a light) there was always a shadow somewhere.” James digs up the skull on the beach that morning and hangs it on his wall. Mrs. Ramsey takes off her shawl and winds it “round the skull, round and round and round, and then she came back to Cam and laid her head almost flat on the pillow beside Cam’s and said how lovely it looked now; how the fairies would love it; it was a bird’s nest; it was a beautiful mountain such as she had seen abroad [...]” (Woolf, 115). Wherever Mrs. Ramsey places herself, “there was always a shadow somewhere.” The shadow warps as Mrs. Ramsey moves about the room to comfort her kids. Where there is light, she cannot spare them of its shadow. She asks them to imagine the boar’s, dizzied round and round and round by her shawl, as beautiful. The shawl softens the boar’s horns into “mountain such as she had seen abroad” (Woolf, 115). Mrs. Ramsey’s light will merge, like Mr. Ramsey’s, with a greater light force, life force, whose eternity projects a landscape: the lighthouse, pulsing with death’s inevitability. One can only look at her inevitable death through a telescope, her light softened through a lens or obscured as a shadow on the wall.<sup>73</sup> Shadows grieve the absence of light. They can cut, like the sharp horns of the dead boar, and offer sorrowful refuge like Mrs. Ramsey’s imaginations. The shadow changes on the bedroom walls like Plato’s Cave, an early allegory for signifiers and signified; one knows a word, the shadow on the wall, but not the world it refers to. Mrs. Ramsey thus engages in a semiotics of death, making mourning into a mountain landscape, a home for fairies, a fairy tale. She casts something beautiful out of the light, in light of, her own

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<sup>73</sup> Carson, Anne. 1998. *Autobiography of Red*. Alfred A. Knopf. 65: To look directly at her, she who inspires shadowy grief, sears the beholder in what images poet Anne Carson’s “memory burn.” The stars are millions of light years away, and yet, dares Herakles, “let’s see someone touch a star and not get burned. He’ll / hold up his finger, Just a memory burn! he’ll say / then I’ll believe it.”

death. This is what she teaches her children. This is what she teaches Woolf. This is what Woolf teaches me.

If her death is light, it is not the dark that we should be afraid of, but the shapes her light makes in it. *To the Lighthouse* mourns Mrs. Ramsey. Woolf Mourns her mother. Mrs. Ramsey doesn't shield her children from the light, from death and the grief it casts over loved ones but turns it beauty. Like the masses in Lily Briscoe's painting. Or, perhaps, a book. Woolf translates death into an experience, *seen*, over any other sensibility, in gradations of light.

Food is seen, too: "Augustus too feasted his eyes on the same plate of fruit, plunged in, broke off a bloom there, a tassel here, and returned, after feasting, to his hive. That was his way of looking, different from hers. But looking together united them" (Woolf, 97). They may see differently but the act of looking "unite[s]" them. Looking also forms a close affiliation with feasting: the eye "feast[s]," prompting a "plung[e]," and a "br[eak]." What does it mean to feast one's eyes? Feast *on* one's eyes? Like a vulture picking out the softest parts of one's dead body? A kind of self-cannibalization? Or to mobilize the eyes in feast, to widen one's pupils so as to take a sight in? Feasting one's eyes, as opposed to with one's mouth, looks like death. Feasting takes on an edge, an abruptness, a violence: Augustus plunges and breaks. Looking at abundance, savoring by sight, which Chris Kraus suggests in *Aliens & Anorexia* as "eternal beatitude," is to eat one's grief.<sup>74</sup> Grief, that is, death's lightshow. Is eating grief a paradox: not eating? Does one choke up with tears, or choke on them, like the old gentleman in Woolf's "A Letter to a Young Poet"? What does choking on our grief do to us? Crease our smiles and gray our hair? Must we feast on grief, or is feasting just a matter of perspective?

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<sup>74</sup> Kraus, Chris. 2000. *Aliens and Anorexia*. MIT Press. 166.

The letter, as is its tendency in all of what we've read, diverts the direct link between eating and death. "Did you find your letters?" asks Mrs. Ramsey of William Bankes (Woolf, 85). And so begins their dinner conversation as they fill their mouths with talk about letters: "It's odd that one scarcely gets anything worth having by post, yet one always wants one's letters," says William (Woolf, 85). The letters are scarcely worth "having," worth keeping. But they are anticipated, wanted. That, and they may not be possessed. The table conversation wanders from letters, guests feast on food, not just the sight of it: Lily Briscoe considers Tansely; Tansely boils with the urge to prove himself; Mr. Ramsey, affable, tells humorous stories; Paul and Minta flirt; and Augustus and Mrs. Ramsey, of course, share a vision, an alternate truth to sharing by mouth: we all die. That, instead of making life at the table, whose existence is not questioned in this moment; where the guests who will die later in the novel, are alive and pattering; where the food atop it is cherished.

Am I mothering you by writing this? A 22-year-old writing a cheap lecture on death? Or does this letter to you regress, like when Prue looks at her mom at the end of "The Window"?<sup>75</sup> Maybe. I am writing, with Woolf, towards another way of living. One that isn't oriented towards a brutal, horned ontology of death. It enmeshes all of our senses, our bodies, in lived experience: taste and smell and feeling and kinesthesia and sight and hearing. To restrict what one eats in sharpens the shadow cast by James's boar skull. In writing this letter, and in you reading it, I hope to divert your life, and mine. I hope to soften the shadows cast by our shared mortality, a gaze that capitalist patriarchy unites us in – staring straight into the eyes of death in the hopes of defying it – might turn our sight, and our mouths, instead, towards the "little daily miracles,

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<sup>75</sup> "That's my mother," thought Prue. Yes; Minta should look at her; Paul Rayley should look at her. That is the thing itself, she felt, as if there were only one person like that in the world; her mother. And, from having been quite grown up, a moment before, talking with others, she became a child again, and what they had been doing was a game, and would her mother sanction their game or condemn it?" (Woolf, 116)

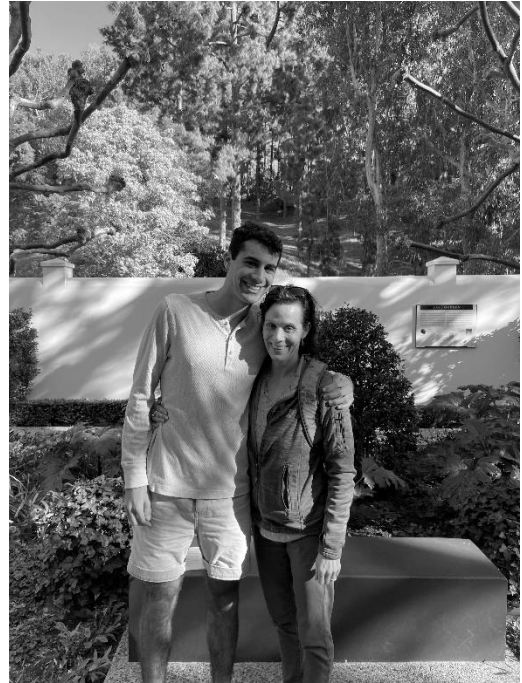


illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark” (Woolf, 161). To catch life in glimpses instead of gorges like high-gloss ads. Stealing beauty instead of staring it down.

## Appendix



Figure 1



You and Me

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